

August 30, 2015 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Reading Deuteronomy 4: 1-2, 6-8

Moses addresses the Israelites, telling them about the Law, which they are to obey. If they do that, they will show their “wisdom and intelligence” to other nations.

Second Reading James 1: 17-18, 21b-22, 27

All good gifts are from God, James says. God willed to give us birth by the “word of truth,” so that we might be the “first-fruits” of His creatures. We must therefore avoid evil and welcome the word planted in us, so that we may be saved. “Be doers of the word,” James says. “Religion pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

Gospel Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Pharisees and Scribes questioned Jesus about his disciples eating without washing their hands, according to Jewish tradition. Jesus answered that this was a human tradition, not from God. Jesus then applied this Scripture to the Pharisees: “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines, human precepts.”

Jesus then said it’s not what or how a man eats that defiles him, but what comes from his heart. These evils from the heart include evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance and folly. These are what defile us.

You may be more aware than I am of when a passing impression or response becomes a thought, and when a thought becomes a definite idea. From the list of evil thoughts and motives that Jesus includes in the Gospel, many have been in my mind at least briefly. (There are moral guidelines for knowing when a vagrant thought becomes an idea and then develops into a plan, but really these aren’t a lot of help when it comes to judging oneself. This is sort of like punching oneself. It’s why doctors don’t usually operate on themselves or members of their family. It’s very hard to be objective about judging ourselves. But it’s also hard for another to judge our thoughts from outside ourselves.)

These considerations leave me in the uncomfortable position of being possibly guilty of evil thoughts, but not being able to pinpoint the guilt. There are several helps from Scripture, 1) St. Paul says, “We don’t know if we’re worthy of love or hatred.” This is true especially in regard to our motives. So, we’ve got to learn to live with ambiguity. God does know our hearts and the goodness or evil or vainglory behind our idea of ourselves. He will both help us to act now and will reward or punish us in the future. 2) Not knowing how we truly measure up in the thought and motive department, we can at least follow James’ advice, “Religion pure and undefiled ...is to care for orphans and widows, and keep oneself unspotted ...” If we don’t always feel love for others, we should at least protect them from injustices, and take care of their needs as their right and our duty. 3) Pray to be forgiven for the sins of which you are not aware. These are probably the worst, because they are not even on your checklist of moral failings, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t hurtful to others and therefore to Christ, who is present in those others. Pray for forgiveness for your unknown sins now.