

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8

Psalm 15

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

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

With our Gospel reading today, it's common for us preachers to make a distinction between what you might call 'little t' traditions, and the great 'big T' Tradition. So for instance, in the Gospel we hear how there was a tradition among the Jews of washing their hands and their food implements in a ritual way, and Jesus was asked why some of his disciples did not keep this tradition.

It's likely that the origin of such practices was connected in part to the need for good hygiene in the ancient world – an imperative that we became all-too-familiar with in recent years. And yet, even in its earliest forms, such practices were also connected to the awareness of their need for 'clean hands' in the metaphorical sense – in other words, our need for a clean heart before God.

And Jesus could see that for many in his day the practice of ritual washing had lost this deeper connection, and that instead it had become largely a matter of show, hiding the fact that—on the inside—many people were filled with all sorts of evil intentions.

And I suspect that it was not so much the fact that people were falling short of the great ideal of spiritual cleanliness that upset Jesus—after all, he regularly welcomed and ate with sinners of various kinds. Rather, it seems that Jesus was more upset with the hypocrisy – the fact that such practices were being used as a cover, by which folks could pretend that they were in fact cleaner than they were. In other words, these practices had become for many a pretence by which they could hide from their inner uncleanness, and both avoid the hard work of ongoing conversion, and judge their neighbours in the process.

So in this case, the 'little t' tradition was the practice of ritual washing, and the 'big T' tradition it was connected to was the need to strive for a clean heart before God.

Now it's worth pointing out that simply dispensing with the practice of ritual washing was no guarantee that someone would be clean on the inside either, especially if someone was inclined to spiritual laziness. Again, this is focusing simply on the externals, which is to largely miss the point. The problem wasn't the ritual washing – the problem was the hypocrisy. And so, whether they did the ritual or not, the key question was whether or not they were humbly striving for inner cleanliness. In this way, Jesus lets none of us off the hook. *All of us* are called to strive for ongoing conversion.

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This distinction between ‘little t’ traditions and the ‘big T’ Tradition is something that most Catholics are quite familiar with. Over our two-thousand-year history, various traditions have developed in different parts of the world as local expressions of the deeper truths of our faith – these include various forms of private prayer and devotions (such as the rosary or novenas), legitimate differences in our public liturgical worship in different times and places, various traditions of religious art, to say nothing of the colourful popular festivals associated with assorted feasts in different parts of the world. Many of these traditions are very worthwhile – I practice many of them myself, and they form part of the rich and beautiful palate of our global Catholic faith. When done well, these traditions are healthy expressions of our universal faith, and they can help guide people on the path of genuine inner conversion.

Now, of course we’re still human beings with the same propensity to miss the point, and so it should not surprise us that the practice of such traditions can still be used by us as a means of avoiding our deeper spiritual prerogative. Indeed, it’s been a common argument of many Protestants that we Catholics get too caught up in our ‘small t’ traditions and miss the bigger picture. This argument was taken on board by many Catholics following the Second Vatican Council, and in many places there was a great purging of ‘small t’ traditions within the Church (Fish on Fridays, anyone?).

No doubt there was some truth in this argument, though you could also argue that the wholesale dispensing of ‘small t’ traditions during the Reformation and to some extent following Vatican II could also be seen as a throwing of the baby out with the bathwater. After all, Jesus did warn us about trying to sift the weeds from the wheat too prematurely, and doing away with assorted ‘small t’ traditions too hastily can run the risk of tarnishing the ‘big T’ tradition they’re intended to serve.

When I speak of the ‘big T’ Tradition, I mean fundamentally the revelation and teaching of Jesus Christ, as taught by Holy Scripture and passed on and taught by the Apostles and their successors the bishops. So for instance, the Scriptural canon, the Creed, the practice of the Sacraments through a valid priesthood, the teaching office of the pope and the bishops in union with him, the command to love God and neighbour, the call to share the Good News with the nations – these are all essential parts of the ‘Big T’ Tradition of our Catholic faith.

And as we heard in our first reading, the laws and customs of Israel—their ‘small t’ traditions—were given to them by God as a means of helping them find their way along the bigger path of conversion. We human beings struggle to live our day-to-day lives without traditions of some kind, and if we don’t have any we tend to invent them for ourselves (life also becomes decidedly boring without them). This is why the Church in her wisdom has allowed the various ‘small t’ traditions of our faith over the centuries, whilst she has also seen the need to keep an eye on them to make sure they’re actually serving the larger purpose and not getting in the way.

Remember, Jesus wasn’t upset so much with the traditions themselves, but rather with the hypocritical way that people were practicing them. And so, while for some people

it's the practice of 'small t' traditions that can be a distraction and a means of avoiding the real work of conversion, for others it can actually be the opposite – for some it's the fact that they think of themselves as being free of such things that can be a source of pride and a means of avoiding the real work of conversion. Remember, Jesus lets none of us off the hook.

All of us tend to try to look better than we really are. Jesus wants us to be better than we look. Let me say that again. *All of us try to look better than we really are. Jesus wants us to be better than we look.*

What God wants from all of us is an undivided heart. Not 'a little time for God here on the side and then back to real life' – God wants *all* of us. Trying to live our faith as partly "yes" and partly "no" – that's no good for us or anyone else. God desires our ongoing conversion, because he knows this is ultimately where we will find the fulfilment of our heart's deepest longings.

It is this conversion that is the purpose of all the external trappings of our faith, and it is this conversion that we are invited into once more in this morning's Eucharist.