

**Reflection on the Gospel-22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

After our lengthy detour over the past six weeks into the gospel of John with its focus on Jesus as the Bread of Life and the Bread of Wisdom, we return to Mark's gospel and a legal dispute about ritual purity. The parties to the dispute are Jesus, the Pharisees, and some of the scribes or teachers of the law. [It is worth noting that Mark's non-Jewish readers, at a later time and in another place, need to be given detailed information about certain Jewish traditions].

At issue for the scribes and Pharisees in the story is the failure of Jesus' disciples to respect their oral tradition, in this instance to perform ritual washings before eating. From their perspective, the disciples are not "walking" according to the tradition of the elders. For the Markan Jesus, "the command of God" is paramount, not some distorted interpretation of it. He offers a hard-hitting counter-critique of their attitude to law. He calls them "hypocrites" and informs them that the condemnation of the prophet Isaiah was intended for them. They have so distorted God's law, substituting their own observances for the "commandment of God" that their prayer amounts to nothing more than lip-service. Their hearts are far from God, and their worship is worthless! For Jesus, there are criteria other than such observances for determining who is clean or unclean. He has already declared the leper clean (Mk. 1:41-45).

For Jesus and for all his people, the "heart" is the locus of purity and impurity, the seat of the intellect and of morality as well as of the emotions. In the kin-dom of God, therefore, one's thoughts, desires, and intentions render one clean or unclean rather than one's attention to hygiene. The latter is important, but is judged to be peripheral. Washing hands before eating is an entirely legitimate use of water, not because it is prescribed by some law, but because it has a cleansing effect where cleansing is desirable. It is worth applying the criteria provided at the end of the passage to discover whether or not our "hearts" are near or distant from our God in whatever we do.

The real-life Pharisees of the first century were the respected teachers of God's law. It is imperative that stories such as we find in today's gospel are not used to denigrate the Jews or to pit Christianity over against Judaism. We have to keep reminding ourselves that we are often dealing in the gospels with in-house debates between Jewish groups. This episode, with its attention to ritual washing, also raises the issue of the right use of water, that precious earth element without which there would be no life at all on our planet. We take water for drinking and washing. Let us not take it for granted.