



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue  
in the City of New York

The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD, *Rector*  
John Scott, LVO, D. Mus., *Organist and Director of Music*  
[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)

**Sunday, September 2, 2012**

*The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost*

*Choral Eucharist  
at 11am*

+

A Sermon by  
The Reverend Joel C. Daniels  
on  
Saint Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

+

*PURITY OF HEART*

It's customary, in many cultures, to give a brief thanksgiving before meals. In many traditions, including ours, we thank God for the gifts he has given us, both these in front of us and all the others. These prayers don't have to be anything ornate and complicated; just a simple acknowledgment of the one who is the source of all things, and a way of recognizing God's presence there. In other words, it's a way of sanctifying the ordinary; acknowledging that that food, and that time, is holy. This is one of our motivations for saying a blessing before a meal.

This is the same motivation that the Pharisees have in today's reading from the Gospel of Mark. Their desire to show their love for God by acknowledging the sanctity of the common and everyday was what was at the root of their practices of maintaining ritual cleanliness—another way of saying their prayers before they tucked into their food. It was out of a sincere love for God that they did this, intending to follow God's commandments as closely as possible. But something had happened, and they were honoring God with their following of ritual actions, but not with their hearts. And for this Jesus convicted them of hypocrisy—saying one thing but doing another. Their hope could not reside in ritualized actions; their hope couldn't be fulfilled by superficial religious efforts.

Mark spends a fair bit of time and gives a fair bit of descriptive detail in writing up this episode, and for good reason. He was dealing with some very serious business going on in his community, which was made up of both Jews and Gentiles, and one of the things they were trying to figure out was what the role of the Jewish law should be. This was a matter of some contention; all over the New Testament we hear that this issue was dividing communities. So again and again in today's reading Mark hits the issue: the Pharisees wash this, they wash that (cups, pots, kettles)—four times he says “wash”; and they get slammed for their observance of tradition—four times Mark mentions tradition. Mark wants to de-emphasize these things, because they were distracting the community from what was more important. He's making it clear: Christ didn't come to get people to engage in more rituals; Christ didn't come to encourage the empty repetition of pious religious language.

On the contrary, he rejects it in a pretty radical way; after Jesus' talk about what defiles a person (what goes out, not what comes in) Mark inserts a sort of parenthetical comment in verse 19. He says tersely, quote, “thus [Jesus] declared all foods clean.” So in case you didn't get the implicit point before, Mark inserts it explicitly and, in these six little words, centuries of Jewish dietary restrictions are overturned so that Mark's community—Jews and Gentiles both—can get together, have supper, and eat whatever they'd like without getting into arguments about it. (Of course, it also makes Jesus, and his

Jewish followers, apostates, and seals their religious fate.) Mark is narrating here one of the most consequential episodes in Jesus's ministry, which allows for the full inclusion of the Gentiles into salvation history—the inclusion of all of us who aren't native children of Israel. The food laws had been established during the exile to maintain the boundaries around the community; these boundaries fulfilled the essential task of preserving the continuity of the Jewish tradition when it was very much under threat, and this is the tradition that nurtured and formed Jesus himself. With Jesus' ministry, though, these boundaries were being greatly expanded, expanded enough that they could encompass the whole world.

So the boundaries were being expanded, but the expectations being applied to the people of God—Jews and Gentiles alike now—were not exactly being relaxed. Jesus says that what is more important than this understandable Pharisaic desire to make holy the most common things of life—cups and pots and kettles—more important is the avoidance of evil intentions. If you're going to be in this new, greatly expanded, community, he gives a long list of what's important: the avoidance of the intentions that result in fornication, theft, murder, and so forth; twelve prohibitions in all. (Perhaps one aimed at each disciple?)

So it's clear that Jesus wasn't calling for an overthrow of the Jewish law altogether. Rather, he's calling for another kind of Hebrew purity taking precedence: purity of the heart. The difference, however, is that Jesus makes this purity of the heart standard an absolute. He relaxes one set of demands ("thus he declared all foods clean"), but greatly intensifies another. So we might say that Jesus doesn't so much abolish the purity Torah, as bring it to completion in an all-embracing sense—a sense that reaches down to the deepest depths of the human being. This is a purity code of the heart, a purity code that embraces the entire existence of a person.

That's not a small thing. Because purity of the hands I can take care of fairly easily; purity of the heart, though, is quite a different matter. How in the world can you accomplish that kind of thing? How do you get to a place where, instead of wickedness and envy and pride, one's heart is full of faith, hope, and charity? For some people it seems so easy; and for some of us, it seems so hard.

I'm not an expert on pure hearts, I'm sorry to say, so I can't make any claims based on personal experience. We have seen, however, throughout our history, men and women whom the Church has recognized as saints; people whose lives—whose hearts—became so aligned with God that they allow us to get a peek into a holy life looks like—not as perfect people, but as exemplars for us.

And if we were going to try to follow their examples—if we were going to try to fill our hearts with love—we might do what so many of them have done: immerse ourselves in ritual actions, in the observance of the gifts of our tradition. Like them, we might train our hearts through the discipline of prayer, of scripture reading, of worship. We might practice recognizing the sanctity of the ordinary. Sing the praises of God. Confess our sins. Let the rhythm of the liturgy—yes, the "tradition of the elders"—help bring our hearts toward following the commandment of God. It's no wonder that the great spiritual leaders of our history are people who have followed the daily cycle of worship, ritual worship—people like Teresa of Avila and Saint Francis from centuries ago, or Mother Teresa and Desmond Tutu in more contemporary times. For them there was no discontinuity between ritual and the commandment of love; one helped facilitate the other.

They knew that we don't engage in ritual for God's sake; that's one of the things the Pharisees were getting mixed up about. We engage in ritual for our sake. We do it to help us out, to etch love onto our hearts. Not for God, but for us. Because we want our hearts to be pure, but while the spirit is so willing, the flesh is so weak. And so we say our prayers again, and we listen to the words of the Lord again, and we receive the Eucharist again. And we pray: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts. Assist us with thy grace. And have mercy upon us; Lord, have mercy upon us.