

Dear Brothers and Sisters



When was the last time you washed your hands?

“Why do your disciples not follow the tradition of the elders but instead eat a meal with unclean hands?” is the question asked of Jesus by the Pharisees.

A good question. We grew up hearing the same thing: ‘Make sure you wash your hands’ or ‘Did you wash your hands?’ It’s the very thing we say to our kids before sitting down for dinner. My mother certainly did.

But we live in a culture that is obsessed with cleanliness. Ours is a sanitized, anti-bacterial world:

Irish Spring. Dial. Deodorant. Body Wash. Listerine. Perfume. Aftershave.

Jesus is asked about unclean hands not out of concern for personal hygiene, but out of concern for ritual purity. A foreign concept to us perhaps. None of us ask the kids ‘Are you ritually pure?’ before giving them lunch. But that was exactly what the Pharisees and scribes were asking when they posed the question.

Odd? To us yes. But if you think about it, it’s not such a daft question after all. Is it not important to be ritually pure? And if clean hands are an exterior sign of this, or at least the desire for this, why should they not be clean? Can the question be dismissed as irrelevant?

That depends on what we mean by ‘ritual purity.’ For the Jews it was the condition necessary to enter into the presence of God. ‘Be Holy for I the Lord am Holy.’ (Leviticus)

This ritual purity was expressed in the cleansing of cups, jugs, kettles and beds, the bathing in the Mikvah, and the washing of hands.

But no matter how clean things are, no matter how much we wash, there is a dirt that remains within. We are not clean, we are not pure. No amount of Irish Spring or Dial can get rid of this dirt.

To deny this is to live a fantasy.

To accept it is a great Good News.

St. Teresa of Avila said that when a strong light enters a room, the first thing you notice is the dust, the dirt. While there is no light the dirt cannot be seen, but it is there none the less.

This strong light is the love of Christ, received in the Word and the Sacraments.

This light comes to enlighten us today.

Fr. Sean