

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells us that it is always what goes on *inside* that matters, not what happens outside. The whole of his teaching was directed inwardly, to the heart. He criticizes the Jewish religious laws about washing before eating: hands were ritually washed, pots and pans and cups were ritually cleaned. It is quite clear that none of this mattered particularly to Jesus, who pointed out that it is inward cleanliness, cleanliness of heart that truly matters.

It's important, too, to realize how much the Pharisees hated him for this. Their whole way of life was based on the many, many religious laws and observances – well over six hundred of them – which they prided themselves on keeping. On the other hand, the Lord seemed to ignore many of them for much of the time.

The truly spiritual life and all true religious observances take place in the heart: inwardly, not outwardly. Jesus emphasizes this again and again:

- When you pray, pray in private...
- When you give to charity, don't let your right hand know what your left hand is doing...
- When you fast, don't let anyone know you're fasting...

- Before you look outside to the speck in your brother's or sister's eye, first look inside, to the plank in your own...

He always addressed himself to the *inward* person. This is because outwardly it is perfectly possible for our lips to be saying a prayer while inwardly, our heart is filled with resentment against another person...

It is perfectly possible for us outwardly to be present at Mass while inwardly, our mind is full of critical, judgmental thoughts...

It is perfectly possible for us outwardly to be fasting on Ash Wednesday with our stomachs while inwardly, we are feeding our souls with jealousy, bitterness, lust and anger...

It is perfectly possible for us outwardly kneel before the tabernacle while inwardly, we are brooding over some wrong or insult or injury.

It's not only perfectly possible, it is actual: it happens to us.

We all know that.

The Lord is *not* saying that religious laws and observances are unimportant or unnecessary – of course they're important – but they are secondary. What he *is* saying is that what happens outwardly has no meaning or value at

all, if it does not spring from and is not a reflection of what happens inwardly, in the heart. Inward spirituality of the heart stands on its own – it does not need outward rules and observances to express itself. On the other hand, outward rules and observances do *not* stand on their own: if there is no spirituality of the heart behind them, they are worthless.

Hypocrisy is the one human vice that Jesus could not abide. The Pharisees and scribes in particular came in for a tongue-lashing. In the gospel of Matthew he tells the people not to imitate them, because they don't practice what they preach, that they put heavy loads on people's backs but won't lift a finger to help them, that they love being greeted with respect and having the most important seats in the synagogue. Also in Matthew's gospel, in Chapter 23 from verse 13 onwards, we have what are called 'the seven woes', in which the Lord castigates the Pharisees and scribes seven times for their hypocrisy. This is hard stuff: there is nothing of the 'gentle Jesus meek and mild' here – that was a Victorian invention. As a matter of fact, I don't think Jesus was ever meek or mild – and neither should be. We remember, too, that he told us that in this life we must

be as harmless as doves but as cunning as snakes. For Jesus, the hypocrites were easy to identify: they spent most of their time pointing out the flaws and failings of other people, and the rest of the time boasting about their own perfection. This why the Lord loved the *anawim*. The *anawim* of the Old Testament were the poor of every sort: the vulnerable, the marginalized, and socio-economically oppressed, those of lowly status without earthly power. The Hebrew word *anawim* means those who are bowed down, God's 'little ones'; in the gospels they appear as the publican, the tax collector, the prostitute, the dirt-poor, the chronically sick. These people never pretended to be anything other than who and what they were.

Hypocrisy is saying one thing and doing another; it is pretending to be better than we actually are and, as a consequence, looking down on everybody else. It doesn't matter how many Sundays we or anybody else sits in church: God is only interested in how we have treated other people – which means, how well we have loved. Love is always the key: love and hypocrisy cannot occupy the same

space. We all have it within us, whether we believe it or not, the capacity to be a lover rather than a hypocrite: the sanctity needed for it lies buried in our heart – it is a compassion thousands of years old that God put there when he made us. It is the treasure buried in a field, it is the hidden pearl of great price. Ultimately this love is our salvation... and the salvation of this lost, suffering world of shadows.