

Tradition and traditions

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Context

After five consecutive Sunday gospels addressing the Bread of Life Discourse in John’s Gospel, we again return to the primary source of gospel readings for Year B in the Liturgical Cycle: the Gospel according to Mark. When we last proclaimed this gospel we did so in the 15th and 16th Sundays of Year B. In those Sundays Jesus had sent the disciples out on mission “two by two and gave them authority over unclean spirits. He instructed them to take nothing for the journey but a walking stick— no food, no sack, no money in their belts. They were, however, to wear sandals but not a second tunic.” (Mark 6:7-9). While the disciples are on mission, Mark notes the ministry of John the Baptist and his death at the hands of King Herod (vv.14-29). The disciples return from their mission and Jesus calls them (v.31) to “Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.” It is at this point the Mark will include the miraculous feeding of the people – and we turned our attention to the Gospel of John. But what happens in the remainder of Mark 7?

Immediately after the multiplication of the loaves, Mark narrates a second scene in which Jesus calms a wind-swept sea on behalf of his fearful disciples (6:45–52; echoing 4:35–41) in which Jesus comes to the boat walking on the water. Jesus’ calming of the sea and the disciples (vv. 50–51) are further signs for Mark and his readers that Jesus was their Lord of creation. Only God had such mastery over the sea (e.g., Gen 1:1–10). The back-to-back miracles of the breads and walking on the water would seem to be enough to lead people to believe in the person of Jesus, but... “[Jesus] got into the boat with them and the wind died down. They were completely astounded. They had not understood the incident of the loaves. On the contrary, their hearts were hardened.” Does this mean the disciples began to disbelieve? Not likely given they remain with Jesus. “When Mark says that the hearts of Jesus’ disciples were hardened (v. 52), it seems that he is looking for something more from his readers. He hopes that they will question their own degree of intimacy with their risen Lord. In their own wind-tossed times, some forty years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, would the reassuring words of Jesus (“Do not be afraid!”) be enough for them? Or was the fear of the first disciples still present in the Christian community? Mark hopes that his readers will come to understand the meaning of *all* the events, including Jesus’ humiliating death, as they understand more about the loaves. He hopes that their fears will be resolved when, at the Eucharist, they come to understand their own suffering in the light of Jesus’ sacrifice for them and for all his people.” (Van Linden, 917)

Chapter 6 ends with the summary statement “Whatever villages or towns or countryside he entered, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and begged him that they might touch only the tassel on his cloak; and as

many as touched it were healed." (v.56) This seems to be in contrast to the disciples with the hardened hearts. This is also in contrast to the Pharisees and the leaders of Jerusalem who will begin to oppose Jesus in Chapter 7.

Tradition and traditions

Mark 7:8, referring to "*human traditions*" is often a verse which non-Catholic folk will hold up as proof text of the manner in which the Catholic Church has gone astray, introducing all manner of non-Biblical beliefs. The usual list includes there is the veneration of Mary, her Immaculate Conception and her bodily Assumption into Heaven. There is also the transubstantiation, praying to saints, the confessional, penance, purgatory, and more. There are the variety of would-be apologists that do not understand what the Church offers about these topics, but there are Protestant and Reformed apologists who are quite clear on the Church's teaching, but hold the root error is that Catholics place Sacred Tradition on the same par as Sacred Scripture. Is there analysis true? Let's hear from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC):

The Relationship Between Tradition And Sacred Scripture (CCC §§80-83)

One common source. . . "Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture, then, are bound closely together, and communicate one with the other. For both of them, flowing out from the same divine well-spring, come together in some fashion to form one thing, and move towards the same goal." (*Dei Verbum* 9) Each of them makes present and fruitful in the Church the mystery of Christ, who promised to remain with his own "always, to the close of the age". (Mt 28:20)

. . . two distinct modes of transmission. . . "Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit." (*DV* 9) "And [Holy] Tradition transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit. It transmits it to the successors of the apostles so that, enlightened by the Spirit of truth, they may faithfully preserve, expound and spread it abroad by their preaching." (*DV* 9)

As a result the Church, to whom the transmission and interpretation of Revelation is entrusted, "does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence." (*DV* 9)

Apostolic Tradition and ecclesial traditions

The Tradition here in question comes from the apostles and hands on what they received from Jesus' teaching and example and what they learned from the Holy Spirit. The first generation of Christians did not yet have a written New Testament, and the New Testament itself demonstrates the process of living Tradition.

Tradition is to be distinguished from the various theological, disciplinary, liturgical or devotional traditions, born in the local churches over time. These are the particular forms, adapted to different places and times, in which the great Tradition is expressed. In the light of Tradition, these traditions can be retained, modified or even abandoned under the guidance of the Church's Magisterium.

As a Church we rely on the constancy of Tradition which is considered part of the *depositum fidei* (deposit of faith) – Sacred Scripture and Tradition together. The other traditions can come and go as it seems beneficial to the faithful. But there is one additional aspect: authentic interpretation. The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This means that the task of interpretation has been entrusted to

the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome (CCC §85). Yet, it is often the very exercise of this teaching office that non-Catholics would label as “human tradition” since it is not explicit in Scripture. As we study this passage in Mark be attentive to which “traditions” are being spoken about in the context of the passage and the Faith.

Commentary

Tradition of the elders. ¹ Now when the Pharisees with some scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, ² they observed that some of his disciples ate their meals with unclean, that is, unwashed, hands. ³ (For the Pharisees and, in fact, all Jews, do not eat without carefully washing their hands, keeping the tradition of the elders. ⁴ And on coming from the marketplace they do not eat without purifying themselves. And there are many other things that they have traditionally observed, the purification of cups and jugs and kettles (and beds).)

One is quickly reminded that Mark is writing for a non-Jewish audience as he explains a detail about ritual purification that would be unneeded for a Jewish audience. It also seems clear that Mark has an outsider’s almost disdainful view of the practices (vv.3-4) but in any case there is no interest in Jewish debates on the matter. While the *Pharisees with some scribes* represent perhaps differing takes on the customs of purification, there is no immediate retort to the customs themselves. Instead, Jesus quickly takes up *the tradition of the elders* (v.3).

In Judaism there is the written Law (Torah) as seen in the Hebrew Scriptures, but there was also the Oral Torah. According to Rabbinical Judaism, the Oral Torah was given to Moses with the Torah at Mount Sinai, as an exposition to the latter. The accumulated traditions of the Oral Law, expounded by scholars in each generation from Moses onward, is considered as the necessary basis for the interpretation, and often for the reading, of the Written Law. Jews sometimes refer to this as the *Masorah*, roughly translated as tradition, though that word is often used in a narrower sense to mean traditions concerning the editing and reading of the Biblical text. The resulting Jewish law and custom is called *halakha*. The *halakha* is the collective body of Jewish religious laws derived from the Written and Oral Torah. It includes the 613 *mitzvot* ("commandments"), subsequent talmudic and rabbinic law and the customs and traditions compiled in the age after Moses.

In the time after Jesus and the later destruction of Jerusalem by Roman armies, what had previously only been committed to an oral testimony among the scholars, came to be written down in a work called the *Mishnah*. The *Mishnah* teaches the oral traditions by example, presenting actual cases being brought to judgment, usually along with the debate on the matter and the judgment that was given by a notable rabbi based on the *halakha*, *mitzvot*, and spirit of the teaching that guided his decision. In this way, it brings to everyday reality the practice of the *mitzvot* as presented in the Bible, and aims to cover all aspects of human living, serve as an example for future judgments, and, most important, demonstrate pragmatic exercise of the Biblical laws, which was much needed since the time when the Second Temple was destroyed (70 CE). The *Mishnah* does not claim to be the development of new laws, but rather the collection of existing understanding of the meaning of God’s commandments in the Torah.

Shepherd and Teacher. *So the Pharisees and scribes questioned him, “Why do your disciples not follow the tradition of the elders but instead eat a meal with unclean hands?”*

In Mark 6:34 and following, Mark represents Jesus as the true shepherd of Israel. One easily hears the echo of Ezekiel 34:10 in which God promises that he himself will shepherd: “*Thus says the Lord GOD: Look! I am coming against these shepherds. I will take my sheep out of their hand and put a stop to their shepherding my flock, so that these shepherds will no longer pasture them. I will deliver my flock from their mouths so it will not become their food.*” While this passage is normally considered in the context of the kings of Israel and Judah, in the post-Exile period the “shepherding” of the people to the Covenant

became the responsibility of the religious leaders of the nation.

In the question the Pharisees and scribes take as a given the tradition/understanding of the requirements of the Torah and *mitzvot*. They are not only questioning Jesus' adherence to the accepted traditions and understanding, but they are questioning his leadership. The logic is that if Jesus does not teach his disciples even the most basic practices of piety, he cannot be an orthodox or acceptable religious teacher. The litmus test is the accepted tradition and the understanding surrounding it. In addition, their question seeks to embarrass Jesus in front of the crowds and thus undermine his authority as a teacher.

Jesus Answers. ⁶ *He responded, "Well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; '7 In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines human precepts.'* ⁸ *You disregard God's commandment but cling to human tradition."*...

One should immediately notice that Jesus does not respond to the specifics of the question posed. He responds to their intention and as well their competence for religious leadership. Jesus' response provides reasoning for rejecting the human traditions that are imposed upon people as an authentic interpretation of the Law. Only the first part appears in the Sunday gospel reading. Jesus first challenges the "elders" with a quotation from Isaiah (vv. 6–7; Isa 29:13) that castigates the people because they substitute human teaching for true devotion to God. The quotation introduces the distinction between outward piety and devotion to God in one's heart. What is "in the heart" forms the basis for the teaching that follows the exchange between Jesus and his enemies. Jesus substitutes a new understanding of purity.

The second and third part of Jesus' response is contained in verses not part of the Sunday Gospel: ⁸ *You disregard God's commandment but cling to human tradition.* ⁹ *He went on to say, "How well you have set aside the commandment of God in order to uphold your tradition!"* ¹⁰ *For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and 'Whoever curses father or mother shall die.'* ¹¹ *Yet you say, 'If a person says to father or mother, "Any support you might have had from me is qorban"' (meaning, dedicated to God),* ¹² *you allow him to do nothing more for his father or mother.* ¹³ *You nullify the word of God in favor of your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many such things."*

Each citation of scripture is introduced with the charge that the questioners fulfill or set aside its words in an excellent way – "how well" (*kalōs*; vv. 6, 9). The word that they should keep, "Honor your father and your mother," instead they set aside. The one they should avoid, teaching human traditions with a heart far from God (v.7) they fulfill. A similar argument is extended into the discussion on *qorban* – that is dedicated to the Temple. The argument being made is that Pharisees are making a human vow of dedication as superior to the commandment of God.

The last verse (v.13) moves from these specific cases to the general practice of teaching such traditions. A progression of verbs indicates the disastrous effect of such teaching. The opponents are said to progressively "disregard God's commandment" (v.8), "set aside the commandment" (v.9), and finally "nullify the word of God" (v.13). This generalization removes the discussion from the question concerning particular traditions. It rejects all such heartless interpretation as opposed to the word of God.

Jesus Summons the Flock

¹⁴ *He summoned the crowd again and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand.* ¹⁵ *Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person; but the things that come out from within are what defile."....* ²¹ *From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder,* ²² *adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly.* ²³ *All these evils come from within and they defile."*

Notice that the Pharisee's attempt to discredit Jesus as an authoritative teacher fail. Jesus summons the crowd and their response indicates that Jesus' opponents have failed in their attempt. Jesus resumes his role as authoritative teacher (cf. 1:27).

Jesus asserts that nothing one eats or drinks can defile a person (v. 15a). Instead of concern with external categories, Jesus insists that impurity comes from within. “Hellenistic Jewish writers explained Jewish rules concerning clean and unclean animals in moralizing terms. Animals that Jews are not permitted to eat exhibit undesirable moral traits. The original challenge did not concern food that is either impure or non-kosher but ritual washing associated with meals. Jesus’ reply, which refers to what is “taken into” and “comes out” of a person, shifts to rules that governed the behavior of all Jews. Readers have seen that Jesus was not concerned with being defiled by contact with persons like the leper (1:41) and the hemorrhaging woman (5:30–34). He could even command the leper to carry out the purification rites required by the Law (1:44).” [Perkins, 607]

The first half, “what goes in cannot defile,” is justified by an anatomical observation. Food travels through the digestive tract into the latrine; it never comes near a person’s heart (vv. 18–19). The second half, “*Nothing that enters one from outside can defile,*” uses a catalogue of vices to depict the inner corruption of the heart. The vices include actions proscribed in the Ten Commandments (theft, murder, adultery, avarice or envy, deceit). Consequently, Jesus continues to uphold the commandment of God, which his opponents undermine.

Rejection of kosher rules and other purification rituals takes away the observable outward markers that separate Jews from their Gentile neighbors. A Jewish teacher might insist that the moral virtues in Jesus’ list are just as important as kosher rules and that both are central to Jewish identity. External rules remind Jews that they are different from other nations. Mark’s generalization makes a claim about the Christian community as a whole. External practices do not distinguish its members from their non-Christian neighbors. This claim has important implications for the next episode, in which Jesus enters Gentile territory and heals the child of a Gentile woman.

Final Thoughts

“Why Mark presents this heavy conflict passage here is just as important as the message it contains. This conflict section interrupts a chain of six miracle stories (it comes after the feeding of the multitude, the walk on the water, and the healing of the crowds; it is followed by the healing of the Canaanite child, the cure of the deaf-mute, and the second feeding of the multitude). Mark seems to have at least two reasons for doing this. First, this heightens the tension of his drama, suggesting that anyone who chooses to follow Jesus as healer will be involved in many conflicts for the sake of the gospel, perhaps even with religious leaders and structures. Secondly, the conflict passage builds on his theme of the slow-witted disciples, because they need special tutoring again (here in v. 17), as they did earlier (in 4:10, 34). Thus Mark challenges Christian leaders within his audience to reevaluate the way they understand and pass on the Christian tradition entrusted to them.” [Van Linden, 918]

Two key concerns emerge from this text. The first has to do with Jesus’ definition of spirituality in terms of heart actions, thought, and interaction with others. This is an extension of Jesus’ emphasis on the law of loving God and loving one’s neighbor, where the focus is on right relationship. The second is the implication that Jesus’ remarks had for his own authority. Who had the right to make pronouncements about issues tied to Jewish tradition and to the law? Jesus’ apparent comfort in speaking on matters pertaining to the law and with making judgments about them suggests a self-understanding that he could speak for God in his divine role and call. [Turner and Bock, 461]

NOTES

Mark 7:3 *washing their hands.* The practice was to wash “the fist”, but the exact meaning of this term is disputed. Did it mean one washed up to the wrist? Did it indicate the amount of water to be poured? Did one pour with a cupped hand? The full details are not clear, but it seems that only a small amount of water was needed to meet the requirement. The instruction from the Mishnah (*m. Yadayim* 1.1; 2.3) was to use an amount of water equivalent to the size of one and a half eggs. Observance of this custom was

especially important after coming from the marketplace, where uncleanness might easily be contracted (cf. *y. Shevi'it* 6.1).

tradition of the elders. Lit., “the tradition of the elders” (for discussion on this, see Josephus *Antiquities* 13.297, 408). The body of detailed, unwritten, human laws regarded by the scribes and Pharisees to have the same binding force as that of the Mosaic law; cf Gal 1:14. According to the law, priests were to wash their hands before offering a sacrifice (Num 18:8–13), something that kept them from becoming “common” or unclean (Lev 15:11, LXX). This instruction was then extended to lay people in the first century, especially by the Pharisees and Essenes (*b. Hullin* 105a, 106a-b; *b. Shabbat* 13b-14b).

Mark 7:4 purification of cups and jugs and kettles. Commands regarding washings and issues of cleanliness covering all kinds of situations can be found in Lev 11–15. Jewish tradition came to expand this practice to discuss the specific objects washed in detail so as to protect a person from uncleanness.

Mark 7:5 tradition of the elders. Lit., “walk according to the tradition of the elders.” To “walk” in Judaism is to “live” in a certain way. Jewish *halakha* (from the verb for “go” or “walk”) taught about the walk of actual religious life and practice. The expression “tradition of the elders” refers back to Mark 7:3.

Mark 7:6–7 you hypocrites! This phrase is far more common in Matthew (thirteen times) than in Mark, where this is its only use. Luke uses it three times. A hypocrite is really an “actor”, and not the person he or she appears to be. *their hearts are far from me. ... In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines human precepts.* The citation is from Isa 29:13, especially as it appears in the LXX.

Mark 7:9 How well you have set aside the commandment of God. The Greek reads, “You reject the command of God well.” Jesus argued that they were in complete disobedience. The adverb “well” adds a touch of sarcasm, because they did this so “beautifully” (*kalōs*).

in order to hold on to your own tradition. Their rejection was to “establish” or “validate” their tradition. God’s voice was muted by their tradition. The next few verses illustrate how this worked.

Mark 7:11 qorban A formula for a gift belonging to God and thus rendered it unusable for any other purpose (Lev 2:1, 4, 12–13; Josephus *Antiquities* 4.73; *Against Apion* 1.167; *m. Nedarim* 5.6). Taking this religious vow either prevented a person from using his resources to help care for his parents or became such a focal point that he simply disregarded their needs. Jesus saw the act as a violation of the divine command to honor one’s parents. Archaeologists have discovered an ossuary lid marked “*qorban*,” which indicates that the practice was typical of Jesus’ time. Although the term could mean no more than an item offered to the Temple, it appears to have taken on the status of a vow attached to goods, which meant that they could not be used for any other purpose. Later rabbinic legislation discusses cases in which an individual can be released from such a vow. The need to obey the command to “honor father and mother” by supporting aging parents was explicitly decided in favor of the Mosaic commandment. The existence of that dispute in later Judaism suggests that the issue raised by Jesus was probably a matter of contention in his time as well.

Mark 7:13 you nullify. They cancelled or set aside God’s word by giving such a controlling status to tradition. This verb (*akuroō*) is used only three times in the NT (in the parallel Matt 15:6 and in Gal 3:17).

Mark 7:14 the crowd. Jesus broadened his remarks beyond the Pharisees and scribes; he called on the crowd to really comprehend what he was saying.

Mark 7:16 “Anyone who has ears to hear ought to hear.” This verse is not in the earlier manuscripts of Mark and thus it is absent in many recent translations. It restates the call to hear already given in Mark 7:14. It is omitted because it is lacking in some of the best Greek manuscripts and was probably transferred here by scribes from Mark 4:9,23.

Mark 7:18 cannot defile He explained why food is not an ultimate concern, since it both enters and exits the body (Mark 7:19). In this, Jesus was in continuity with the OT prophets (Isa 1:10–20; Amos 5:21–27).

Mark 7:19 (*Thus he declared all foods clean*): if this bold declaration goes back to Jesus, its force was not realized among Jewish Christians in the early church; cf Acts 10:1–11:18.

Mark 7:20 *But what comes out of a person, that is what defiles*. The key principle for Jesus is that it is what proceeds from within, from the heart (Mark 7:21)—actions and thoughts that impact relationships—that defiles a person.

Mark 7:21 *evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder*. This list of vices resembles the “deeds of the flesh” in Gal 5:19–21 (cf. Wis 14:25–26; 1QS 4:9–11; Rom 1:29–31; 1 Pet 4:13). Such lists were common, and some were very long (Philo, *Sacrifices of Cain and Abel* 32 has 150 items; Marcus 2000:459). “Envy” (lit., “an evil eye”); on the evil eye, see Deut 15:9; Prov 28:22; Sir 14:8–10; 35:8–10.

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