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In a certain monastery when the monks assembled in the chapel for Vespers the monastery cat would get in the way and distract the monks from prayer. So the abbot ordered that the cat be tied up in the chapel during evening prayer. After the abbot died, the cat continued to be tied up during evening prayer. And when that cat died, another cat was fetched so that it could also be tied up during evening prayer. Many centuries later scholarly articles were written by the learned monks on the liturgical significance of tying up a cat during Vespers.

We could become slaves to doing things certain ways and never question why we are doing them. This is especially true when it comes to religious rituals. Last week I spoke about marriage. This is an area where tradition or even sentiment could take precedence over a living faith. For instance some seem to marry at the Church for mostly sentimental reasons, while others marry in the church. Big difference between 'at' and 'in'. The Church is the family of God and if we have distanced ourselves from that family then the church becomes little more than a sacred building, a glorified registry office, pretty and all as it might be for a wedding. But when we are a vital part of the faith family participating in the Mass every Sunday, marriage in church makes all the difference.

The Pharisees had invented all sorts of peculiar customs which prevented the people from eating certain foods regarded by them as unclean. Jesus takes issue with them and their man-made rules and declares that it's not what goes into the stomach of a man or woman that makes them unclean but it's what comes out of a man or woman's heart which does the harm. Some religions get very uptight about foods they can or can't eat, whether it be pork, or beef or whatever but in line with the teaching of Jesus it doesn't make the slightest difference to one's spiritual well-being what you eat. From the Christian perspective all foods are clean.

We could get so caught up with the externals of religion or worse still, even use them to reinforce our prejudices. Jesus reproached the Pharisees of putting aside the commandments of God which required them to love God and their neighbour and clinging to mere man-made traditions. They put love of the law ahead of the law of love. Hence they had no compassion for those who didn't hold fast to their traditions and Jesus told them as much. For them washing hands before and after meals was more important than being clean within, precisely what they were not.

Being clean within will mean there is a correlation between our outward worship of God and the compassion and love we show towards our neighbour. Otherwise our worship of God is mere lip-service.

Jesus says today: 'it's what comes out of a person's heart which makes him or her unclean' because it from the heart that evil intentions emerge. But the opposite is also true. We are asked to love God with all our heart and our neighbour as ourselves and not settle for anything less.