

This weekend, of all things, I am thinking of the movie, *Men in Black*. I am a child of the 90's and *Men in Black* is a classic of that time period. I've seen it multiple times throughout my life. Will Smith is hilarious in it and plays perfectly off of Tommy Lee Jones and the special effects were great at the time and have held up pretty well over the years. It's one of those movies that is a great combination of humor, heart and action.

There are several characters in the movie who are not who they seem to be. One of these characters, played brilliantly by Vincent D'Onofrio, starts out as a bad-tempered farmer who discovers a crashed UFO in his yard. He goes out to inspect what has happened and gets attacked by the alien who crashed there. For the rest of the movie, he appears to be that same farmer, but in reality is a gigantic cockroach-like alien who is hiding under his skin. After the alien takes over, there is always something a bit off about the farmer, because he really isn't human, but a hostile alien posing as a human.

Another character in *Men in Black* who is not who he appears to be is an old man with a cat. Eventually, the man dies and is taken to a local morgue, where Will Smith's character oversees his autopsy. As the doctor at the morgue examines the old man's head, all of a sudden she discovers a spot behind his ear which opens up his head to reveal a tiny alien hiding inside of him. It's a similar bit that runs throughout the whole movie--aliens hiding inside human costumes. But this alien, unlike the giant cockroach alien hiding in the farmer, is tiny and humble. He is not a threat; in fact, with his dying breaths, he attempts to give the agent played by Will Smith and the doctor information to save his galaxy. This galaxy is apparently the target of the hostile giant cockroach posing as a farmer.

So what does any of that have to do with the readings we ponder this weekend? Why am I reminiscing about characters from a silly sci-fi flick from the 90's? I think these two characters can help us remember what Jesus is warning the scribes and Pharisees and us about in the Gospels.

Jesus is frustrated because the scribes and Pharisees are all about external appearances and are not letting God's grace transform their hearts. Jesus wasn't angry at them because they kept the ritual washing traditions of the Jewish people, but because these outward expressions of religious practice were done from hearts that were proud and resistant to being changed by God. There were,

no doubt, observant Jews who followed the same exterior practices but from a place of love for God and openness to His grace and guidance. These people were able to be changed by Jesus' words, whereas the scribes and Pharisees bristled at them. The difference was their hearts.

Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah to drive his point home:

*This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching as doctrines human precepts.*

Jesus is pointing out, in continuity with the prophets, that all of the human precepts put forward by the Jews regarding ritual washings were for the sake of bringing their hearts closer to God. Just like those scribes and Pharisees, the danger for you and me is to put on a good show, but in our heart to be far from God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Jesus reminds us that our heart, our inner core where we can encounter the living God, this is what is ultimately important. Within each of us there is that inner place where we either live with God and cooperate with his grace, or ignore and even reject God and spurn His help. The scribes and Pharisees put on a good show for others and were only too ready to judge others about their ritual observance, but in their hearts, they were empty, dead, separated from the life that God wanted to give them.

If we choose to live in that way, separating our hearts from God, then we will pollute our inner sanctuary, where God is supposed to reign. By our Baptism, we have been made temples of the Holy Spirit, but it is entirely possible for us to make our hearts temples of everything other than God. Jesus warns us: "From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within and they defile."

So this Gospel challenges us to take a serious look within ourselves. What is the state of our heart? If our inner self were laid bare for others, would they see the person we outwardly project? If we are honest, I think we could all look inside ourselves and see a cockroach at one point or another. I certainly can. The farmer in the movie always seemed a bit off because inside, he was really a

malicious cockroach bent on destruction. We may try to put on airs for others, but if we are filled inside with all kinds of darkness, this will eventually destroy all our relationships. Sin causes us to become inwardly dead, only focused on ourselves, to the detriment of all else. If we put on an outer mask to cover inner darkness, we will never bear the fruit our lives are meant to bear, and one day we will stand before the judgement seat of God, where nothing is hidden.

On the other hand, if, in our hearts, we resemble that tiny alien inside the old man, if we have a heart which humbly welcomes the word that has been planted in us and is able to save our souls, as Saint James encourages us in the second reading, we will more and more be those people who don't have to put on airs. Our hearts will be guided by the gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. When God's grace controls our hearts, it allows us truly to live from who we are within, to let people see who we truly are. It allows us to live as God made us to live, authentically, from hearts renewed and purified by His grace.

So let us do some soul searching this week. If we discover the cockroach within us, let's not be discouraged. When God allows us to recognize our sin, it is for the sake of our salvation. He has the grace to make us whole again, above all in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. There, He can wipe away whatever grime we have allowed to build up in our hearts and make them new again, make them temples of the Holy Spirit. If we don't find the gigantic cockroach within, praise God! In that case, let's ask the Lord to help us lean into His grace even more deeply so that even those lesser faults within us can be wiped away by His grace, making our hearts even more what He made them to be.

+ Heavenly Father, thank you for challenging us through your Son today. Jesus, thank you for reminding us of the danger of having our hearts closed to Your grace. Help us to trust that You can make our hearts new. Holy Spirit, help us to cooperate with Your grace so that we might live the abundant life you have for us from hearts made pure! We ask this through Christ, Our Lord. Amen. +