

St Philip and St James

Palma de Mallorca Spain

29th August 2021

The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity

Theme: Worshipping God in Spirit and Truth

Text: Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15 & 21-23

Introduction

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen. The lectionary ends its 5 weeks' journey with the Gospel of John and now we are back to the Gospel of Mark. Today's gospel also brings us to another controversy dialogue between Jesus and his perennial opponents. Who are these opponents? The situation here is that at one level, the controversy is between the Judean elite who were 5% of the population, and everyone else. The elites lived in towns and cities and had access, time, and money for the water needed to follow their interpretation of the washing required to follow the Torah. Remember, we are talking of dry regions where water was scarce and therefore expensive to access. The amount of water, time and money to follow those practices was beyond the reach of most people. And so, most people were seen by the elites as unclean.

Exegesis of the Text

In the text, Jesus addresses three different audiences: first, a group of Pharisees and scribes who raise the question of defilement, second, the crowd that is perpetually present, and third, the disciples who, true to character in Mark's Gospel, don't understand. The message is delivered differently to each of these groups, but its essence is the same: our very selves are defiled, made unholy, not by what we take in, but by the corrosion of the human heart. Jesus' three different versions of this message build on one another, thus enabling a fuller understanding of what is at stake: we must prepare our hearts, and thereby our selves, for the kingdom of God.

The conflict between Jesus and these scribes and Pharisees begins with a question of ritual purity, although Jesus quickly steers the conversation in another direction. The Pharisees and scribes notice that some of Jesus' disciples "were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them" (**Mark 7:2**). The explanatory note in verse 3 that the Pharisees, "and all the Jews" follow "the tradition of the elders" by washing their hands thoroughly before they eat is an overstatement by Mark. The mere fact that only 'some' of the disciples did not wash before eating tells us that not all Jews followed the same practice. The phrase, 'tradition of the elders' refers

to the oral interpretations of the Mosaic Law, which the Pharisees and scribes consider authoritative. The "tradition of the elders" is not the teaching of Moses as found in the Bible. It is the practice of the Judean elite which they are seeking to impose as the one and only correct practice. No Old Testament texts call for everyone to wash hands before eating. It is true that every community has traditions that define their identity. Traditions are there to provide continuity with the past and create a sense of community. Even in every church there are traditions that are followed and in the Anglican Church, tradition is one of the three pillars of Anglican identity. The other two pillars are scripture and reason. However, there is a danger when the tradition becomes a stumbling block to progress and growth. There is a danger when tradition supersedes scripture. This is what Jesus criticised in his fellow Jews. They were good at observing all the traditions about external things without caring about their spirit. In Jesus' view, this deserves the harsh judgement of Isaiah, **“This people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.”**

Jesus knows, of course, that when the scribes and Pharisees ask why some of his disciples do not wash their hands, the question is not an innocent one. It is meant to expose Jesus. Asking why some of his followers “do not live according to the tradition of the elders” (**Mark 7:5**) is really accusing Jesus of not following the law Himself, of acting as if He believes Himself to be above the law. What kind of a teacher who leads his pupils to violate revered elders’ teachings, that is, the legal interpretations affirmed by at least these scribes and Pharisees? Knowing this, Jesus responds with a rebuke from Isaiah (**Isaiah 7:6-7**), which changes the direction of the conversation: “**This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me**” (**Mark 7:6b**). However, when they criticize Jesus’ disciples for eating with defiled hands, the Pharisees and scribes go beyond the requirements of God’s law by trying to enforce human interpretations of the law that have been handed down by rabbis through the centuries. **Exodus 30:18-21 and 40:31** require the cleansing of hands, but only for priests (“Aaron and his sons”) and only when they go into the tent of meeting or come near the altar, in other words, when they are attending to sacred duties within sacred space. The Pharisees gradually adopted this practice of ritual hand washing as a way of showing devotion to God and as a “boundary marker,” a way for Jews to proclaim their identity as distinct from their pagan neighbours.

This reproach is more than a condemnation of empty worship practices; it is a condemnation of the scribes' and Pharisees' distortion of tradition in order to circumvent the law. Jesus is not rejecting the law; in fact, he is rebuking them for their failure to uphold it. Thus even with regard to the scribes and Pharisees, the issue at hand is not that of ritual purity, or even of what traditions Jesus' disciples ought to follow (or not). The issue is the state of the human heart. Jesus brings up the matter of the heart with his quotation of Isaiah: the hearts of **“this people” are far from God (Mark 7:6b)**. The phrase “This people,” it becomes clear in verse 14, includes not just the scribes and Pharisees. As Mark writes, **“Then he called the crowd again and said to them, ‘Listen to me, all of you, and understand’ ” (Mark 7:14)**. Jesus is speaking here to all who are gathered around him, including, presumably, the sick whom he had just healed and the people who had carried them to him. What they must understand is that it is not what you take into yourself that renders you impure, but rather **“the things that come out are what defile” (Mark 7:15)**. Whatever your practice, Jesus is saying, whichever traditions you do or don't uphold, these are not the things that, by themselves, get you ready for God's kingdom. Jesus proclaims a religion that is a religion of the heart. He is not interested in external things, for these cannot defile a person, but what lies in our hearts is the source of our actions.

Application

The struggle that every community in every age faces - including our own - is how can the "tradition of the elders," which has given us our identity, now be changed so that what was good in it - the desire to live according to the will of God - can actually be expressed in our current circumstances. And so the passage ends with a representative (not exhaustive) list of things capable of making a person impure (**verses 21b-22**). Some are deeds; others are character traits and attitudes. All originate, Jesus says, in "the human heart," which for the ancients represented the seat of rationality and will. In any case, the parabolic nature of Jesus' comments supports the conclusion that hand-washing and foods are not the main concern here. Instead, **Mark 7:1-23** speaks much more plainly about the *source* of defilement: it's more internal than external. It's more about who you are than about the foods or filth you avoid. Jesus often impresses upon us the need to act upon his word. It is not enough to honour him with our lips. One can argue with words, but deeds speak for themselves. Jesus protested against hypocrisy that abandoned the commandments of God in order to cling to 'human traditions.' God sees the heart and its fluctuations. **What Jesus is asking of us is to worship Him in spirit and truth.** He judges us on the love of our lives and our efforts to love. In the

evening of life God will see not just what we did, but the heart of goodness by which we lived. A practical way of letting the good flow is to be grateful. On any day we can always think of something to be thankful for. In thanks, the spirit of joy and blessing will flow into us and through us. The "tradition of our elders" did not drop down, fully formed, from heaven. The tradition of the elders is not the will of God. Rather the tradition is our elders' distilled wisdom through generations of trial and error. Because it is distilled wisdom, it is instructive and worthy of careful regard. Remember these words from God which we normally recite from our Book of Common Prayer liturgy, *“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”* **Amen.**

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