

James 1: 17 – end

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

Before I start my sermon I just want to say that I often have difficulty with the new lectionary the church uses. It cuts passages of scripture up and gives us events out of context and here it has chopped the passage up so that part of Jesus's discussion with the Pharisees is missing. I suspect the intention is to make it simpler but it does skew what we are thinking about. I will do my best to fill in the gaps

Introduction

What do you see when you look in a mirror? Is the reflection an honest one, or is there more to see than the outward appearance? As we thought about in our activity we can present an outward appearance that doesn't honestly reflect what we think and how we actually live.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus is defending his disciples against the Pharisees who criticise them for not washing their hands before eating. They are ignoring the 'purity rules' set out by the religious leaders and the Pharisees suggest that that reflects on their spiritual status. Jesus counters their attack with his own accusation that they are hypocrites who find fault in others but ignore the inconsistencies of their own rituals. The example Jesus uses is how they use scripture to stop them having to provide for their parents as instructed by the law of Moses.

Jesus holds a mirror up to the way they observe their faith. Being called 'religious' – or doing something 'religiously' – often has negative connotations, reminding us of those for whom religious practice is more important than authentic faith. For the Pharisees in today's reading, outward observance of the law is more important than inner defilement by the evil in our hearts, minds and imagination.

Washing our hands has become an important part of our lives since the pandemic. We have been encouraged to sing a song or a verse of a hymn to make sure we wash for a full 20 seconds. But are we sometimes more dedicated to the idea of the ritual than to its practice, just as the Pharisees were to their rituals? Things become rituals quickly, and we cease to notice what we are doing.

In our family we like traditions. One of our Christmas traditions is that on Christmas morning, after the younger members have had their stocking

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presents everyone, gets dressed in their Christmas clothes and has breakfast, In late morning my mother or these days my sister or I pause in the preparations for dinner and make a large jug of white lady cocktail and break out the sherry and we all sit down together with a drink in hand to open our presents and offer our gifts to each other. All parts of this tradition are enjoyable but the point of it is to open the presents and share with each other. It would be ridiculous to say, 'We haven't got our cocktails so we cannot open our presents'. But that is how the Pharisees were thinking and how we can too easily behave today in our Christian lives. We can miss the point behind the teaching and fixate on the tradition.

Jesus' argument with the Pharisees is that by teaching as fundamental law what is in fact only human custom rather than divine revelation they are guilty of hypocrisy and play acting. They are claiming to be teachers of the law but in fact they are only teaching human traditions

The issue at stake here is, 'Who was speaking for God?' Who was offering a way of life that honours the God who spoke through scripture. The Pharisees, over two centuries had built up an agenda that was both political and religious. The traditions that they had developed meant that scripture was being interpreted and applied in particular directions, supporting particular programmes – not least revolt against Roman rule.

Jesus by his kingdom movement was challenging the very basis on which the Pharisees had built up their power. His message was that the problem was not the physical things that we eat or that come out of us that are dirty. It is the attitudes that come out of our hearts that can be at fault. He tells us there is a deeper need for purity in our lives. The challenge of the Gospel is to human hearts. Good and bad external actions come from internal and spiritual sources.

The poisoned wells of human motivation are the real problem to which the purity laws are pointing. The problem is that we, as the Pharisees, can get distracted by the tradition behind our actions and miss the whole point of why we do them.

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When we make a cup of tea, most of us have got used to teabags. Many of us dispense with a teapot and go straight to a mug. But sometimes, in a café or tea house, or my house, we will be brought a pot with loose tea, a cup and saucer and milk in a jug. Somehow the slow pace of waiting for a brew and using a tea strainer feels decadent – a generous and hospitable waste of time, but one that results in a different experience. Knowing Jesus and learning to live as his disciples should change us and inform the way we live with one another. We need to take time to learn from one another, to shape and support one another in our Christian values.

James in his letter cares little for the detail of doctrine but much for living a life that reflects the values of the God who calls and gifts us. God has planted his word in us so that we would be the harvest of right living the world needs to see. So, he tells his hearers, how we live matters (vv.19-21). Otherwise we are like people who look in the mirror and promptly forget what they look like, who they actually are.

The word James uses three times in verses 26-27, religious/religion (in Greek *threskos*), refers to religious practice, both private and in public. We are to be the same in church on Sundays as we are during the week at work. Such a life of devotion to God gets noticed by those around us. And what does this look like? Caring for orphans and widows and not allowing the world's propaganda to ensnare us and lead us astray.

Sometimes, I think, in our worship and in our lives together we can be more concerned about the form of things, the traditions we are used to than the meaning behind them and why we actually do what we do. This past eighteen months has been terrible and we have had to do without much of what is important to us as Christians and as a church family. But I think it has also been a time of growth and exploration as we have realised what is actually important to us as Christians. We have found that, although we miss some things very much, they were not actually necessary to building up our relationship with God. We have done worship in different ways, we have missed singing in church and sharing the peace, we have used this opportunity to use different prayers and different sorts of music and worship songs. A lot of that has been hard

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and some of us haven't liked it. But I hope that it has helped us to begin to understand the difference between those things that are fundamental to our faith – like receiving Holy Communion which has been very much missed and those things that are simply tradition and taste, like what hymns we sing and what sort of liturgy we use.

As we move out of the pandemic it is very much my hope and prayer that we will rediscover what is important about our life together and fundamental to our faith and what we need to examine and decide if it is preventing us from coming freely and openly to our saviour.