

Introduction

I have been thinking this week about Religion and why in many quarters it has such a bad name. When I am meeting with parents to discuss having their children baptized we usually talk about the fact that Jesus calls us to freedom and forgiveness yet when you ask a range of people what Christianity is about they often say it is a restrictive system of rules based on the ten commandments and all they hear in their heads is worshipping God is framed by a number of 'Thou shalt nots'

The problem we have is that faith in God is all about relationship but as human beings we have trended to reduce it to ritual. The form of our worship becomes more important to us than who it is we are worshipping. This is the problem the Pharisees had – and it is a problem we can have today. They had a set of rules which were designed to keep them ritually clean or 'holy' but the rules worked to exclude people from God's presence and to allow them to make judgements about people.

In our reading today Jesus is criticized by the Pharisees for spending time with people that they considered to be sinful and unholy. This is the danger of a religion which is all external, in which ritual demands have taken the place of love

Jesus was prepared to sit at table with sinners. To share a meal was a sign of intimacy and Jesus was consistently willing to identify himself with the undesirable – thus making himself unclean. For the religious leaders their faith was about form, not about

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love. For them ritual was everything. They had to be seen observing the letter of the law regarding religious practice. For Jesus the most important thing was to bring life to sinners.

We are told that Jesus had seen a man called Matthew, identified in Mark and Luke's Gospels as Levi, sitting at the Tax Collector's booth. He had invited the man to follow him and we are told 'he arose and went with him'. The tax office at Capernaum would be concerned with tolls on goods coming across the frontier of Herod Antipas's tetrarchy either across the lake from the ten cities or across the Jordan from his brother Philip's territory. So Matthew was apparently a custom's official rather than a collector of direct taxes. The two occupations were often linked together in Jewish thought and often bracketed with thieves and sinners in general. Both occupations were despised as unpatriotic and inevitable involved contact with ritual uncleanness, quite apart from the extortion which was an inevitable result of the economic system.

Matthew was one of the many outcasts that were despised by the religious elite and the irony is that instead of reaching out to them with God's love and forgiveness they avoided them, looked down on them and ignored them. Jesus' offence in the eyes of the Pharisees was that he was prepared to sit at table with 'sinners' a term applied to anyone who could not or would not keep the scribal rules of tithing and purity.

When I was in my teens my mother sister and brother and I moved to live in a terraced council house in Croydon following my parent's divorce. Our next door

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neighbours were very committed members at the local chapel. They worshipped two or three times a week and looked down on everyone else in the street as being heathen. Not long after we moved in we noticed that the bottom of our garden was fenced off and being cultivated by our neighbor who was also using the garage behind our house. My mother was sure that our neighbour must have made an arrangement with the council because no one so 'religious' would simply help themselves to our property. His wife was the most vicious tongued, judgmental person I had ever met and ten years later when my mother went to buy the house we found that the land had been taken by our neighbour and because he had occupied it for so long it now belonged to him in law. Their problem, like the Pharisees was that they considered that, as long as they kept the rules of worship and the form of religious observance, they were holy.

For the Pharisees the first priority was their obedience to regulations for Jesus it was a mission to people. ~ a healer must get his hands dirty! In the Jewish religion those who were invited to the heavenly banquet were the righteous. Jesus shocks his listeners by turning that on its head. He has come to seek those who were disqualified from the banquet. 'I have not come to call the righteous but sinners'

In Jesus' terms The Pharisees were sick but didn't know it. Jesus questions the adequacy of their righteousness.. Sinners who hunger and thirst for righteousness are closer to true righteousness than the self-satisfied.

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Our story moves on to tell of two people in desperate need but who in religious terms were unclean. In order to help them Jesus would himself become ritually unclean, something unthinkable to a Pharisee but something that didn't concern Jesus. His priority was to reach out in love and forgiveness to those who recognised their need and asked for help.

The woman had been bleeding internally for twelve years, as such she was unclean and ostracized from close contact with her family or neighbours. Hers was a lonely painful degrading life she had no one to act on her behalf or to show her affection. Jesus calls her daughter, this is the only time he is recorded as having used these words to anyone. He reacted to her with immense compassion and love, 'He said, Take heart daughter, your faith has healed you'. I wonder what it must have felt like to her, who had taken all her courage to creep into the crowd and touch him. Take heart: simple words but showing extraordinary compassion and gentleness, and understanding of what it was to be her and the love and power to transform her situation.

Unlike the woman the ruler, or Jairus as he is named in the other Gospels, has power and influence and he is able to act as an advocate on behalf of his daughter. But he too was in desperate need and believed that Jesus not only could but would help him.

It is easy for us to be critical of others. I worry when I read stories about the Pharisees, I too am a religious leader in a position of authority. Do I think myself better than those I serve? Do I make judgements? It

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was easy for my family to criticize our neighbours but we are all called to account for ourselves

It is so easy for us to be critical of others; it's easy to tell others what they should or should not be doing. We all have power, some have a lot, others a little, but we all have the ability to choose how we use what we have in responding to events and people. Are we critical of people for not showing up to church or not coming to church events or Bible study, but not so good at asking why? Wondering if people are okay? In the story, Jesus could have shunned the woman with the hemorrhage, just as the rest of the community had. He could have chosen to say nothing. He could have chosen not to heal her. But he didn't. He went the extra mile.

In his answer to the Pharisees he used some words from the prophet Hosea and said that what he required was mercy, not sacrifice. By that he meant ritual sacrifice. He wanted our religious effort to be put into love and compassion, to care for others and help them find freedom and hope. God wants us to worship him, to show him honour and he loves it when we meet together in church and sing his praises. But if that is as far as our faith in him goes we are lost. If we insist that we worship God in one way and criticize others for their worship then we aren't honoring God as he calls us to do. Jesus calls us to bring our faith with us wherever we go, he wants us to model merciful living as he did, he challenges us to not write anyone off but to reach out to them with the love and compassion that he showed to those he came to save.

Who do we know who needs to know God's love and mercy. Are there ways we can practically help them and show them God's love and mercy?