

After a funeral I took recently as she left a lady said to me those words that I hear so often, “I am not normally religious but” In fact she went on to say, “I am not normally religious but actually I found that quite moving.” And the time was not right, the moment was not right, the opportunity with a whole queue of people behind her made it not the right time, but I so wanted to say, “No, I’m not religious either.”

And that is what our gospel reading this morning is all about. In my NRSV bible the section is entitled the tradition of the elders.

A man called Richard Hooker who lived in the second half of the 16th century, is often credited with the image of Anglican theology being represented by a three legged stool – those legs representing Scripture, Reason and Tradition. Whether or not it was devised by Richard Hooker, the image can be very useful, as we imagine different traditions within Anglicanism having legs on that stool which they consider to be of different importance – the anglo-catholics are often considered to believe that tradition is the more important, whereas the more evangelical Anglicans veer towards the scripture leg being the more important, and sometimes people consider reason to be more of a personal influencer.

But our gospel reading points out some of the dangers of tradition – especially where tradition takes us towards religion. Let me explain.

We had at the beginning of the reading a rather strange discussion apparently about whether Jesus’ disciples wash their hands before eating and the Pharisees accusing them of eating with defiled hands. Now you may remember a few weeks ago I talked about the Scribes and the Pharisees – the Scribes were the people who wrote the laws which governed how the Jewish people lived, and the Pharisees were people who devoted their lives to simply following those laws, so they knew them inside out. Well I say they knew them inside out – but at the time of Jesus these rules had all been passed on by word of mouth – it would be several hundred years later before they were written down in a book called the Mishnah. And so what the Pharisees were saying is that Jesus’ disciples were not living according to the rules that the Scribes had made up, and passed on by word of mouth. Or according to their religion.

At first reading you may well think, “Well of course the disciples should wash their hands before eating – we would, we teach our children to, so perhaps the Pharisees had a point.” No. Nobody is suggesting the disciples’ hands were dirty: the accusation was that the disciples had not followed the Pharisees rules as to how hands should be washed. The disciples’ hands were not described as dirty, but defiled – in a state of spiritual impurity.

You see a few verses later on the Pharisees ask Jesus, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders , but eat with defiled hands?”

There is no accusation that the disciples are not following the word of God, but the tradition of the elders, their religion. And that is what Jesus is arguing with the Pharisees about – and in fact so important does Jesus consider this issue that this is the longest disagreement section recorded in Mark’s gospel.

And to respond to the Pharisees, Jesus goes back to the scriptures, and the prophet Isaiah.

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

And then the real punch line:

“You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

What Jesus is saying is that we should not love tradition alone, we should not love rules that man makes up – we should love God.

Having said that, getting the balance right between those three legs of the stool – tradition, scripture and reason, is really very difficult. Those of you who were at my licensing service a few weeks ago will have heard me make various promises, included in which were these words:

I, David John Lee do so affirm and accordingly declare my belief in the faith which is revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds and to which the historic formularies of the Church of England bear witness; and in public prayer and administration of the sacraments I will use only the forms of service which are authorised or allowed by Canon.

And after swearing allegiance to the King I also promised

that I will pay true and canonical obedience to the Bishop of Ely and his successors in all things lawful and honest. So help me God.

And as I was contemplating this sermon I started to wonder how different what I had promised to do was to what those Pharisees were doing back in Jesus' day. Were they not simply following the laws that had been laid down by their predecessors in previous generations – and had not I just promised to do something very similar? Well, as I stand before you this morning I am very much hoping that the answer to that question may be, similar, perhaps, but not the same. And it is that last section of our gospel reading that clarifies this for us.

“When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. He said to them, “So, are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters not the heart but the stomach and goes out into the sewer?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.)”

And that explanation is the key to all this. Jesus is not interested in rules about hand washing the right way. Jesus is not interested in rules about what you can and cannot eat, although I'll come back to that in just a second. What Jesus is interested in is the human heart. We are back to talking about relationships – and our relationship with God. That is what is important, not religion.

But what about those rules concerning what you can and you cannot eat. Is Jesus really contradicting what was in the scriptures – those scriptures that we know Jesus faithfully followed? Yes and no. Yes: the Bible says don't eat pork (and lots of other things), and Mark at least thinks Jesus is saying this doesn't apply anymore. No: Jesus' basic point is that purity laws, including food laws, don't actually touch the real human problem, and that that is what the Kingdom of God addresses. But behind this is the strong sense, already here in Jesus, and hammered out in the early church, that what happened in Jesus brought the old scriptures, the whole covenant with Israel, to a new completion, a new fulfilment. The scriptures spoke of purity, and set up codes as signposts to it; Jesus was offering the reality. When you arrive at the destination you don't need the signposts anymore, not because they were worthless but precisely because they were correct.

So then where does this leave us with the tradition scripture and reason balancing act – and those promises I made.

One thing I have always been very clear about since God called me to be ordained, and this time I said “Yes” to him, was that I love the Church of England, and believe you me there are times when that can be challenging. To me what I love is the sense of responsibility I have for all the people that live in our four parishes – not just those of you who chose to come to church. There is no other Christian

protestant denomination that offers that, and to be a priest in that denomination means I have to accept its rules. But actually those rules are not that restrictive – because the Church would not, and does not, put rules in place that mean it is impossible to grow God's church.

[Bring out plant]

I hope this will help me to explain my thinking. This plant, this peace lily, was given to me as a present on the occasion of my ordination as a deacon, and it has lived in the corner of my office at home ever since. I cannot claim I have looked after it particularly well – in fact, to be honest, it is something of a miracle that it is still alive, and that miracle is brought about by Kate countering my neglect of it.

But this week it has decided to produce a flower again. And this, despite the fact that the plant is pretty much the same size as it was when I was given it. But why is that. Well, if you were to look inside you will see that whilst it has had water from time to time, there is very little compost to provide it with any goodness. And what is more it is rather restricted in terms of growth by the size of the pot it is in.

And in a horribly vicary sort of way my plant gave me a real image of our churches here in these 4 villages. And combining that image with Jesus' struggles with tradition, or religion, got me thinking again about how we are going to move forward in our Benefice.

And it got me thinking about three things:

First, we need to be fed.

Second, we need to remove any shackles that we feel are stopping us growing – Are some of our traditions getting in the way of our relationship with God?

And third, we need to remove those restrictions that, like my plant pot, are restricting growth.

Very briefly, on each point. First we need feeding. I hope you feel fed on a Sunday morning, but I also believe we need more than that. Do we have enough opportunities to talk about our faith, our love of God? If we want to learn more do we know where to turn? You know, there is so much material that can help us, either individually or together, to learn more, but at the moment are we using it enough?

Second we need to remove those shackles. We need to look at what we are currently doing, perhaps particularly at our Sunday services and ask ourselves should we be doing them differently – without me breaking canon law of course. Just because we have traditionally done something one way, does that mean its right?

Is how we are doing church, or being church, putting people off from looking for God? It saddens me that there are many people in our villages who profess to be Christians but for some reason don't want to be part of our church. So we must remove those shackles.

And third, we need to remove those restrictions, What restrictions? Well, the inflexibility of our buildings for example. We need to grow our ministry team. We need to fill those vacancies on our PCCs and find second churchwardens in each of our parishes. We need to increase our income not just to pay our parish share – ie the cost of having a rector, and keep our buildings standing, and make them always bright, warm and welcoming, but also to fund missional work both here, and in other places we choose to support.

Three big subjects that are my focus for the next few months and I will be talking about them first on Monday night with our Benefice Forum, then in October with our combined PCCs and and with our ministry team. All with the aim of having a plan in place by Advent Sunday, so that we start the new

Church Year, knowing where we are going next on our journey. So we stop talking about hypothetical ideas, and start doing it.

And of course the most important thing that I haven't mentioned is prayer. Today I ask you to pray for these three things: that as a church and individuals we are properly fed, that the shackles, the unnecessary religion, is removed, and that the barriers, often physical barriers which stop us doing what we want to do, are overcome.

And our prayers are the first step towards loving God, not religion. Talking to Him. Asking for His help and guidance. In time I hope that we will pray for these things together from time to time, but more of that another day.

Let me finish by taking us back to our first reading this morning – from the letter of James. As we look forward to what we can and will achieve as a church, let us remember James' advice to us.

“For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it.”

Amen