

Diocesan sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity: 29. 8.2021

James 1. 17 – end and Mark 7. 1-8, 14 – 15 and 21-23

There's nothing quite like a good argument for a bit of entertainment. It's why people love watching soap operas and drama. And that's what we have here in today's gospel from Mark chapter seven.

Like many arguments it begins with something which appears to be relatively trivial. Picture the scene. Jesus and his disciples are eating food together. Nearby are some scribes and pharisees who are looking on. They notice that the disciples haven't washed their hands in a very specific way before they started to eat. They are so outraged that they complain to Jesus: 'Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?'

In response, Jesus doesn't mince his words. He rounds on them and accuses the scribes and pharisees of being hypocrites: 'You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition'. There's not much 'gentle Jesus meek and mild' here.

So what's going on? Let me set the context. All Jews praised God for the gift of the law. They believed they were the only peoples to whom God has revealed his purposes. For any Jew 'the law' referred to two things: the Ten Commandments and the Pentateuch – the first five books of the Old Testament.

There are some detailed regulations in the Pentateuch but basically it set out some of the great moral principles which every Jew was called to live by. But around 400 years before the birth of Christ a group of religious professionals, the scribes, began to define thousands of additional rules and regulations to cover every aspect of life.

That's what Mark is referring to when he explains 'For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles'. Many centuries later these rules and regulations were written down. Today we know them as the Mishna.

Underlying these thousands of regulations was the assumption made by the scribes that human beings are intrinsically unclean – and by that I don't mean physically dirty. The scribes thought that we were not

acceptable to God or that we would be displeasing to God if we didn't follow various rituals. So this was not about hygiene but was about ceremonial cleansing. Many of these rules were really complex and time consuming. So, for example you had to wash your hands between each course of a meal. You started by pouring water over your hands with the fingers pointing upwards and then poured more water with your hands turned downwards.

Some of these rituals had become so extreme and so demanding that there were times when people found they had no time to fulfil other obligations such as honouring their parents or helping someone who was in trouble. Other rituals were so expensive that poor people were unable to keep them. And that's why Jesus calls the scribes and pharisees 'hypocrites'. They were so obsessed with their petty rules that they failed to observe the things that really matter.

You may have heard the story of a priest who is walking at night through a rough part of the city. Someone came up behind him and he felt the nuzzle of a gun in his back. 'OK mister, give me your money!' Quickly the priest reached for his wallet and as he did so, the thief noticed his clerical collar and realized he was robbing a priest. The thief was overcome with shame. 'Forgive me, Father. I didn't know you were a priest.' To which the victim replied, 'That's all right, Son. Just repent of your sin. Here, have a cigar.' The thief replied, 'Oh, no thank you, Father, I don't smoke during Lent.'

Hypocrisy is a charge that is often made against Christians and the church and of course, it is sometimes justified. It's why St James in today's epistle exhorts us: 'Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror ... and immediately forget what they are like'.

We set out to live up to the highest ideals and sometimes we fail. Is there any one of us who can say that we have always loved our neighbours as ourselves? It's why there is an act of confession at the heart of all our acts of worship, when we acknowledge that:

'We have left undone those things which we ought to have done;
And we have done those things which we ought not to have done'.

It is fundamental to our Christian witness that we are upfront about the fact that no one achieves perfection in this life; all of use to one degree or another are hypocritical and that all of use rely on the mercy of God.

But let's get back to this disagreement between Jesus and the scribes and pharisees. Here in Mark 7 Jesus is turning upside down centuries of religious practice. He calls his followers back to the broad moral principle that we are to love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves (Lev 19.18). He points out that 'There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile ... For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come ... All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.'

This leads Jesus to a really important insight and it's this. People sometimes use religion or belief to project their anxieties onto others; to set rules and standards which they want everyone else to follow. It's based on the idea that 'you are the problem' and 'you need to sort yourself out'; it feeds on the thought that if only everyone else were different or better or more loving then it would solve the problems in the world.

It was Tolstoy who said 'Everyone thinks of changing humanity and nobody thinks of changing himself'. Perhaps that's why Jesus asks: 'Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ... You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye'.

Jesus tells us to stop fretting about what others are getting up to but to sort ourselves out first. So today's gospel invites us to self-examination and self-reflection, that the grace and truth of Christ may take hold of our hearts and minds.

I conclude with a prayer of St Ephrem:

O Lord and Master of my life,
spare me from the spirit of apathy and meddling,
of idle chatter and love of power.
Instead, grant to me, your servant,
the spirit of integrity and humility, of patience and love.
Grant me the grace to be aware of my sins
and not to judge others, for you are blessed,
now and ever and forever. Amen.

+Alan St Albans