

**Matthew 15: 10-28 Romans 11: 1-2a, 29-32 – Clean or unclean?
Sunday 16/08/20, GS, CC & online: Sermon by Rev Phil Wootton**

‘Cleanliness is next to godliness,’ they say. In which case, there must be some truth in the rumours of a religious revival, given how hard we’re all working on our hand-washing, finger scrubbing, sanitizing, disinfecting and surface-cleaning. The importance of being clean comes up repeatedly in the Gospels, with Jesus rejecting the Pharisees’ obsession with it. Obviously, the people of Jesus’ day had no knowledge of bacteria and viruses: their concerns were about being ritually clean for worship, rather than physically clean for lunch.

As you probably know, I’m fascinated by Biblical archaeology, so an article in the *Church Times* a few months ago caught my eye. It suggested that in Jesus’ home town of Nazareth there was an unusually strict approach to purity rules. In Nazareth today the Catholic Basilica of the Annunciation dominates the sky-line. Beside it, beneath the modern ground level, are remains of houses from 1st century – small, simple, and partly in caves – a dramatic contrast to the towering basilica above. Nearby, also underground beneath the Sisters of Nazareth Convent, tunnels lead down to a cavern containing seven basins, carved from the rock – interconnected, to allow water to flow one to another. We’re not exactly sure how these were used – in fact our guide David and the nun showing us round had quite an argument over it. But this is evidence that ritual washing was a major pre-occupation for the people of Nazareth in Jesus’ day.

The new archaeology was about the jars, pots and plates archaeologists have found. Most are made out of stone, preferred by those who were strictly observant who believed stone vessels could not be contaminated. (Think of the stone jars at the wedding at nearby Cana which Jesus attended.) When they were pottery, the clay came from one particular village north of Nazareth, which meant they could closely control production and transportation to avoid contamination. The archaeologists point out the difference between this and the neighbouring town Sepphoris, just five miles up the road, where ceramics have been found from across the empire. There’s something even more striking in farming practices. In the fields around Sepphoris there’s evidence that human excrement was commonly used as fertiliser; but there’s a clear dividing line between these and the fields near Nazareth where there’s none. The demands of ritual cleanliness and of modern hygiene seem to coincide on this one!

So, cleanliness and godliness together went in Jesus’ day, and he had been brought up in one of the religiously more conservative communities in Galilee.



But Jesus has a different take on purity. He knows all about strict adherence to the rules, but his message is to apply this same strictness to your moral and spiritual life – to your words, actions and attitudes. So, to us, he might say: you're scrupulous about scrubbing your skin clean; be just as scrupulous in searching your heart, in spotting your own false motivations and false desires, your self-pretence and self-absorption, and when you've spotted it, do something about it – because these are the real impurities that need to be dealt with.

Now, the issue of clean/unclean, pure/impure may seem like an arcane debate with little relevance to us. But it ceases to be arcane when we realise it's also about people. There's something horrible in human nature that instinctively divides people into clean or unclean, pure or impure, one of 'them' or one of 'us'. We can tell this is about people because of the very next thing that happens in Matthew's Gospel – the second half of today's reading – Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman. She, of course is not a Jew, not one of Jesus' own people. Since he'd gone north out of Galilee, to the region of Tyre and Sidon, there's nothing surprising here. So, he's accosted by this foreign woman who wants him to heal her daughter. Frankly, he's rude to her. First, he ignores her, then he insults her, calling her 'a dog', and then he refuses to help apparently for no other reason than her ethnicity. Now, it may be true to say that in the culture of the time, his words were not as rude as they sound to us, but nevertheless this is not the Jesus we know and love. This is shocking.



People have found different ways to justify Jesus' words: Was he drawing out her faith and knew what he planned all along? Was he testing the disciples for their reaction? Was he challenging the assumption that he could be on everyone's beck and call? The clue, I think, is that he speaks of his own calling – which is 'to the lost sheep of the House of Israel.' At that time his ministry was amongst the Jews. That's the present. The future would be for the Gentiles. But what happens next even seems to catch Jesus by surprise: God's future breaks into the present. Gentiles are included, because of the faith of this one Canaanite woman. This woman will not be rebuffed. She's not meekly riding the insults and begging him. Her response is feisty; she answers Jesus back, using his own words as it were against him, to the point he can hardly refuse.

However you interpret the story, the outcome is clear: the faith of the foreigner – the one considered unclean – is rewarded and her daughter is healed. The story is of God's future breaking in to the present. It's a future where no one is clean or unclean; where there is no Jew nor Greek (or Canaanite), male nor female, slave or free; where all human divisions, separations, prejudices have been done away with; where no one is considered more or less deserving than anyone else.

For centuries, Christians have tried to reverse the Biblical order, and treated Jews as if they were unclean. There is an appalling history of anti-Semitism we need to repent of. For, as St Paul makes clear in Romans, God's promise to the Jews has never been revoked. Jewish heritage (as well as people) should be honoured and valued.

For centuries, Europeans (most of whom called themselves Christians) treated people from Africa as unclean. We've heard the horrible stories of ignorance and prejudice, like when someone tries to wash an African's skin off as if it were dirt. It is appalling that even today we still need campaigns like Black Lives Matter to deal with prejudice that should have been done away with long ago.

Through human history people have treated outsiders as unclean – less deserving of human rights and dignity than locals or nationals. Even today, we are slow to welcome, to accept and to value the outsider (in effect, wondering if they are unclean). When migrants and asylum seekers risk everything to get to this country, it seems we're more interested in arguing about who should pay to stop them, rather than working to provide places where they can be safe and begin new life. And we still tolerate new forms of slavery among us today.

Cleanliness may be next to godliness, if we are giving the soap and water treatment to our own moral and spiritual lives – our words, actions and attitudes. (And hopefully we continue for more than 20 seconds at a time!) Those words and actions must never betray us as holding the attitude that other people are unclean. Paul once more sums it up: 'It is God who justifies: who then can condemn?' ... 'For all are one, in Christ Jesus our Lord.'