

Sermon by Rev Carol Harley for Sunday 29 August 2021 at Good Shepherd
Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

May my words be true to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

We all have certain core traditions and beliefs that are important to us. They make us who we are, they define our own behaviours and the way other people behave. That is what lies behind the Gospel passage from St Mark.

As usual, the Pharisees and Jesus were having a difference of opinion. The Pharisees were upset because Jesus and his disciples didn't take part in the Jewish hand-washing ritual before they ate. To the Pharisees, Jesus and his disciples had committed a sin and they let something get in the way of them seeing the most important things of all. And that something was a potent mixture of their own blindness, their own attempts to keep their religious traditions, their own unwillingness to let go and let God show them that the way in which the earthly mould of his great love was 'Jesus-shaped'.

People who wear glasses, like me, will often say that in the months and maybe years before glasses were prescribed by their optician they always presumed that the newspaper print, the TV captions were slightly blurred - and then came the moment of seeing things in focus, clearly, sharply on what God was doing in Christ, there was a whole new world to be seen – and the Pharisees will have none of it!

In his Gospel, Saint Mark never leaves us for long without a reminder that Jesus's ministry, though God was behind it and the people welcomed it, was, in human terms, to be brought to an embarrassing end by the pride and blindness of men, particularly the Jewish authorities. Here, it's the questions surrounding ritual cleanliness that get in the way of the Pharisees seeing the new world that God is preparing in Christ, his Son – yet another millstone they put around the necks of others. Jesus points to the heart of the matter. 'You neglect the commandments of God, in order to maintain the tradition of men'. For Jesus, the commandments of God lead to life, when men get in the way, they squeeze out that life.

St Mark then brings a new audience onto the stage: the crowd which throughout his Gospel always seems to be waiting in the wings. William Barclay's comment on verse 15 makes for powerful reading: Although it may not seem to do so now, this passage, when it was first spoken, is perhaps the most revolutionary passage in the New Testament.

Having dealt with the ritual handwashing, Jesus turns to their complex dietary laws which formed the bedrock of how a man could be clean before God according to the Pharisees beliefs. With all their rules about what could be eaten and what wasn't allowed, it was a bit like negotiating your way through a minefield. But, for the devout Jew, there was no way around it. Jesus's words cut through it all like a sword. Jesus tells his hearers that it's not what goes into a person that makes a person unclean, but what comes out! In other words, the only kind of uncleanliness that matters for religion is moral uncleanliness.

It's what comes out of his heart, not what goes into his stomach that is of vital importance to God, and determines the true character of a woman or a man. This was revolutionary!

In recent years we will all be aware of how we have, in our different ways, been guilty of contributing to the pollution and poison of our waterways, seas and skies. This has in many ways contributed to global warming and the death and extinction of fish, animals, marine life, the only remedy is to go to the source of the problem and to change the very process that is causing all the trouble.

So too with the human heart, Jesus shows us the poison and pollution that can flow out of it: sinful hearts, theft, murder, adultery, greed and malice, fraud, indecency, envy, slander, arrogance – a destructive mixture indeed! Only a complete change of heart at its deepest level can change the outflow. It is made clear in our Epistle reading from James that the outflow from a life that 'looks into the perfect law, the law that makes us free, and doesn't turn us away, and remembers what he hears and acts upon it' will be completely different. It will do good works of every kind; not good works in order to gain some sort of approval by God, but good works that flow because we have drunk deeply of the water of God and have been refreshed again and again by the unpolluted spring waters that are his love for the world in Christ his Son.

For Jesus, the test of everything to do with the heart of religion seems to be the nature of the food it produces. Could it be that William Barclay was right when he described the Gospel passage for today as being 'revolutionary'? Would you let me read this story because I think it speaks of what Jesus had in mind? It is from an anthology of readings by Victor Gollancz.

The Grand Rabbi of Lyons was a Jewish chaplain to the French forces in the First World War. One day a wounded man staggered into the trench and told the rabbi that a Roman Catholic soldier was on the point of death in no-man's-land, and was begging that his padre should come to him with a crucifix. The padre couldn't be quickly found, he was caring for other casualties on the field of battle. The rabbi quickly tied together two pieces of wood in the trench and ran out with it into no-man's-land. He was seen to hold it before the dying man's eyes. A shot rang out from a sniper's gun. When the battle had passed and the stretcher bearers were able to go out to pick up the wounded, they found the Rabbi of Lyons and the young soldier, both dead, with the improvised cross between them.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.