

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 22 Year B 2021

This week we pick up from where we left off from Gospel of Mark several weeks ago. Mark, being the shortest and most succinct of the gospels, needs a bit of ‘padding out’ we might say, so to spread our reading of it over the course of the year. For several weeks we have delved into the Bread of Life discourse from John 6. Before that, we most recently heard in Mark’s narrative Our Lord say to the Twelve to ‘*come away and rest awhile*’ and that after him commissioning them to share in his own work of preaching repentance, casting out devils and curing the sick. We have heard of Jesus’ own rejection in his hometown of Nazareth: ‘*a prophet is only despised in his own country and among his own people and in his own house*’. And before that the account of the raising of Jairus’ daughter and the healing of the woman who had suffered a hemorrhage for twelve years.

Threads from these last couple of accounts we pick up again now, themes which were clearly of concern to Mark as he writes his Gospel. Echoes of Jesus’ rejection and so being *pushed out* to minister beyond his own people, and of Jesus repositioning the laws of purity in the stories of raising the girl and healing the woman, we revisit in the account placed before us today. And they work their way through the whole of the chapter 7 and well into chapter 8 as well. The Lord Christ cutting through the notions of what is clean and unclean. And this then plays out (as we will hear over the next couple of weeks) into his ministry among the gentiles.

The presenting issue that serves as the springboard for this reflection, is the fact that Jesus’ disciples were observed eating with unwashed hands. This unsettled the pharisees and scribes who had come from Jerusalem who, we are told, were fastidious about such observances. Well, perhaps with fresh insight we can say we too know something about obsession with handwashing... Still, through the lens of 2000 years, we approach the pharisaic preoccupations negatively, as being unhelpful and misguided. We look at the Pharisees and we see something of religion gone wrong. For sure, the laws of purity were clearly outlined in Leviticus. They come from a sense of Israel being the holy people living before the holy God in a holy land with holiness that must be preserved and that requires restoration when injured through contact with what is unclean. The Pharisees took this heart. They are a ‘holiness movement’, if you like. Their aim was that the Jewish people should indeed live out their vocation to be the holy people of God in the *mixed society* that was the Judea of Jesus’ day.

The Pharisees looked to both the civic and religious leadership and saw nothing but compromise and corruption. But they recognized this didn't let them off the hook. God's law still stood and they had the sense to realize that ignoring God's Law had had serious consequences in Israel's past. In other words, their original motives were good.

Yet, as is so often the way of men, these original good intentions were layered with what we hear today as 'the tradition of the elders.' These were not the Levitical laws of purity, contained in the law of Moses, but an oral tradition, handed down through the ages, that supposedly originated with Moses. They were treated as law, but were *not* in fact part of the law. But it does go to highlight how seriously the Pharisees took this idea of purity. But this is actually a near-universal instinct in the ordering of religions. Regulations of purification play a major part in almost all religions. In our own faith, one of the many layers at play in the sacrament of baptism is this very idea of purification. From the small holy water fonts (at the entrance to many churches) we take blessed water and make the sign of the cross. We do so as a reminder of our baptism. It is a simple, ritualized form of cleansing before we enter the Holy Place.

But however they play out, laws and rules and rituals of purification seek to convey the basic idea that *God is Holy and we are other than holy*. We must be liberated from our darkness (from the grime and dirt of our sin) so we are able to approach the holy God. Now, the complex system of cultic purification dominated the whole of life in observant Judaism at the time of Jesus. We get a glimpse of that in the gospel today. But in the gospel, we find a fundamental challenge to this idea that purity can be obtained simply through ritual action. In Mark's Gospel we see the radical transformation that Jesus brought to the concept of purity before God. Our Lord proposes that it is *not* ritual actions that make us pure, in any substantial way. Purity and impurity arise within our hearts. It depends on the condition of our hearts.

So, the question for us arises: how does the heart become pure? Who are the pure in heart, those who can see God, as we hear expressed in the Beatitudes of Matthew's Gospel? Now, typical liberal responses to this question have claimed that Jesus replaced the *ritual* concept of purity with a *moral* concept. In place of all the complex religious observances around the laws of purity and all that went with them, we now have 'morality'. In this view, Christianity is considered to be essentially about morality. Now, we may well understand the appeal. This is a kind of Christianity you may well be familiar with. This is the church of activism, of social justice.

It is the church of getting up close to the poor and marginalized. But it also, in fact, the Christianity that can be constructed *without* Christ, because all that matters is the 'heart' and 'doing the right thing.' Indeed, some branches of the church see this as one of our strongest 'selling points', to put it crudely: no one is as nice, kind, good, and generous as Christians (which we hope might be true!). But we can do all that without a single reference to Christ, and indeed is quite possible, as almost all mainstream Christian charities now show us, and plenty of so-called church schools as well. *That* sector is largely based around the premise of imparting a 'Christian' ethic and a 'value-based' education. But it's difficult to see exactly how said values can be imparted when in many instances *the only* practicing Christian member of staff is the chaplain...

Christianity understood as essentially about morality is attractive, and gets a lot of airspace in certain church circles. But this *does not* do justice to the radically new dimension of the New Testament. In the vision of the New Testament – and we see this in the Acts of the Apostles, in the letters of Paul, in the high priestly prayer of Jesus in John's gospel, as well as in what we hear today – a *radical new sense* of purity. In place of ritual purity what we have now is not merely morality, *but the gift of encounter with Jesus Christ*. It is the Incarnate God who makes us truly pure. It is meeting Jesus, encountering Jesus, *faith in Jesus*, that the heart is made pure.

Without doubt, there is an ethical dimension to Christian faith. Christian faith must be lived in the public sphere. Christianity cannot be reduced to the private and interior, to an experience between 'me and my God.' There are concrete consequences to confessing the Lordship of Christ, many of which necessarily impact our social lives, and some of which we hear in the epistle reading today from Saint James. But the genius of the gospel, and the conviction that shines through the New Testament, is that our moral lives, our pure hearts, come only from the encounter with Jesus Christ. The claims for a Christian morality without Christ, for Christian values without faith, ring hollow, because they have no foundation. They cannot make pure the heart, because no encounter with the Lord Christ is offered. Perhaps they come from good motives, but we actually travel full circle and end up where the pharisees did, who hollowed out their faith. We end up with a works-based religion all over again, and the idea that somehow it is by our striving, our efforts, our works that we are made right. The essential Christian insight, the basic Christian truth is, yes, God is holy and we are not. But God in Christ bridges the gap. It is *He* who makes pure the heart. Amen.