**Mark 7.1-8, 14-15, 21-23
James 1.17-27
1st September 2024**

## Have you washed your hands?

During the Pandemic I remember one Sunday meeting someone in the Gents cloakroom washing his hands singing the National Anthem. Strange, I thought! And then I remembered Government advice had been issued that week that it would be good for us all in those worrying days to spend longer washing our hands, perhaps as long as it took to sing, as it then was, God save our gracious Queen.

Washing hands, for us it’s just a matter of hygiene but in Jesus’s day it was also a matter of identity.

We often portray the Scribes and Pharisees of the gospel stories rather like the ugly sisters in a pantomime. We want to boo and hiss every time they come on.

All too often we forget that these would have been deeply sincere people who had a certain kind of love for God and pride in their nation. They believed that part of the identity of Israel was that it could be a witness to its neighbours. Israel was monotheistic whereas many states over the border were polytheistic. Their vision was to honour the ‘one’ God, Yahweh, in the way they worshipped and lived.

So, the Scribes and Pharisees believed, one way of becoming a witness was to be distinctive in matters of ritual and that’s where handwashing came in.

It was also deemed as something of a privilege. Priests had to wash their hands all the time when on temple duty and the thought went that even though not everyone in the populous was a priest, everyone could be as ritually accurate as priests in their daily lives.

So, bit by bit handwashing, and other similar rituals became something of an identity badge.

So why, we may well ask did Jesus seem to have it in for the religious professionals of his day? In today’s lectionary reading Mark puts these sharp words into the mouth of Jesus as he addresses those pedantic Pharisees: *You neglect the commandments of God, to maintain the tradition of men.* Ouch!

Now that’s surely a seminal verse in Mark’s gospel. Mark is not only the first gospel to be written, it’s also one of the most radical. Mark portrays Jesus as anything but a fundamentalist. The other evangelists don’t appear to be entirely in agreement with Mark on this point so, Matthew tones down this incident in his gospel and Luke neglects it altogether.

There is controversy here, and this morning Mark is introducing us to the controversial Jesus. The one who is critical of some of the interpretations of the scriptures he grew up with as a boy in the Nazareth synagogue.

Of course, not everybody could travel as fast as Jesus on these issues. Indeed, these ideas went on to divide the early Church. Some leaders simply couldn’t move on from old traditions and, for example, insisted that new Gentile Christians should be circumcised. Peter and Paul fell out over how much ritual from the past was appropriate for the present.

This morning, then, let’s linger in the presence of a radical Jesus and listen in to the challenge he presents to those of us who sometimes find an unhealthy security in a rules-based faith, because these words of Jesus are just as much a challenge to us as they ever were to the over sensitive Scribes of Jesus’ day.

One of the big issues that he addresses in this chapter is the essence of ritual itself.

After so much talk about washing hands and eating the right food I wonder how verse 15 was initially received?: *nothing that goes into a person from the outside can defile him, no, it is the things that come out of a person that defile him.*
When it comes to organised religion the externals are relatively easy to regulate and control. For hundreds of years those who hold power in matters of faith have written encyclicals, held councils and formulated creeds. We’ve used the ‘externals’ to differentiate who’s in and who’s out.

In browsing other church’s websites, which is an occupational hazard in my line of work, I’m often struck by the fact that some, on the page entitled *What to expect when you worship with us,* include a line or two about what to wear. What they always say is that there isn’t a dress code, so come as you are. But, I suspect they say this, because they’ve sometimes been asked the question: *Is it all right if I wear jeans, come without a tie, do I have to wear a dress.* And maybe in the past that was the expectation. But now churches want to make the invitation clear – *Come as you are, no dress code. What matters is your presence with us.*So, in today’s passage Jesus is warning his audience against putting too much store by the externals of ritual at the expense of a deeper appreciation of inner, heart-felt faith.

We sometimes think of a ‘sacrament’ – like Holy Communion – as being *an outward expression of an inward grace.*In other words what we do as we take bread and drink wine is not just about the physical but the spiritual, not just about the exterior but also the interior.

I’m also sure that we cannot plan or prescribe such moments of encounter. All that our liturgy and preparation does is simply provide a framework – and in that framework, as the hymns are sung, the silence experienced, the worship corporately shared and the bread and wine eaten and drunk, the Holy Spirit touches our hearts and minds, and we know we have stood on holy ground. What makes those moments special is that as a person is baptised or receives bread and wine, God comes close, and our hearts are ‘strangely warmed’.

And in a way that idea of a faith that changes us from the inside out is also to be found in the reading from the epistle this morning. James makes the point that if we forget to live out our faith in practical and compassionate action it’s like looking at ourselves in a mirror one minute and then forgetting what we look like the next. We are not remembering who we truly are – made in the image of God – an image that extends to body, mind and spirit.

Now a few moments ago we posed the question of what challenges this radical Jesus of Mark’s gospel brings us today. Well, another obvious one is the way he treats scripture.

Jesus, at least as painted by Mark, is very discerning when it comes to scripture. He clearly is comfortable with reassessing the relevance of many of the laws from the Torah.

I like to think of the Bible as a truly living book. In describing it as ‘God breathed’ I don’t see it as truth fixed in stone but truth which has an energy and dynamism to speak to generations across the centuries.

Yet to do that we, like Jesus, must work hard to mine the core messages of scripture. Something ‘breathed by God’ cannot bring about division or oppression because that, surly, isn’t the character of God. So, we must reassess passages that seem to support slavery or the subjugation of women. We must live critically within the texts using our minds to discern what is the core message – and that’s not easy. It feels at times as if faith would be so much simpler if the bible was a smaller book of watertight rules or a constitution. But it isn’t. It’s a book of culture specific stories and myths and we must let it breath and live and grow in our hearts. And that, it appears, was what Jesus was doing here.

So, here’s a final challenge from the radical Jesus this morning – yet I think it’s one that brings us great hope.

Our gospel reading ended today with what seems like a most depressing litany. Verse 21: *From inside, from the human heart, come evil thoughts, acts of fornication, theft, murder, adultery and greed*….and it goes on…and on!

Read this one way and it comes across as the bleakest assessment of the human condition imaginable. But I don’t think that’s what Mark is saying to us here. He has Jesus preach that however much we dress ourselves up and present a highly edited version of ourselves to others, however much we put on a bit of a show, however much we obey all the hygiene rules that have ever been written, when the mask comes down, we are all a bit messed up inside.

So, if it’s the inside that counts so much – which seems to be the basic message of this chapter – isn’t this just a disastrous diagnosis by Jesus?

No! Because that isn’t what the larger gospel story says.

The larger story, lived out by Jesus as he touched those considered unclean and dared to accept and welcome the so called ‘outcasts’ of society, is that God loves us even though he knows all about us.

A few years ago I attended a service at Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church on Shaftesbury Avenue in London and the minister introduced a hymn I’d never heard before and said it was becoming one of their favourites. Bloomsbury is a church that has a history of being welcoming to folk on the margins. It wasn’t by accident that on his visit to London Dr Martin Luther King chose to preach from its pulpit. The hymn, at least the first two verse went like this:

*Come, all you vagabonds,
Come all you ‘don’t belongs’
Winners and losers,
Come, people like me.
Come all you travellers
Tired from the journey,
Come wait a while, stay a while,
Welcomed you’ll be.

Come all you questioners
Looking for answers,
And searching for reasons
And sense in it all;
Come all you fallen,
And come all you broken,
Find strength for your body
And food for your soul.*

We know we can be all messed up inside – yet God meets us here with welcome. That’s the God Jesus spoke about – not one who causes divisions or creates spiritual hierarchies with burdensome rules. This is not the God who asks: *Have you washed your hands?* But the one who says – ‘welcome’ to the table, come as you are and find here the love that will nourish your soul and can change you – from the inside out!

May it be so, in the name of The Father, Son and Spirit. Amen.

 *Ian Green, Amersham, 26th August 2024*