

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 29th August 2021
The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity

Collect

Almighty God,
you search us and know us:
may we rely on you in strength
and rest on you in weakness,
now and in all our days;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

James 1:17end

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfilment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

But 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; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (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.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?' He said to them, 'Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

"This people honours me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines."

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.'

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: 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: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.'

Sermon

There is something about this morning's gospel reading that is either too easy or too difficult. Too easy because one possible response is to hear the criticisms of the scribes and Pharisees that Jesus's disciples are not adhering to certain traditions; hear Jesus's response; and give ourselves a big pat on the back, thanking God that we are not like those "other people" – whether from different times in history, different faiths or just plain different – who follow particular rules at the expense of what really matters.

Too difficult because of that sentence of Jesus that it really is impossible to ignore: "For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come." It feels like quite a blow. How can we know this and live with ourselves? Does this make our lives a continual self-flagellation, seeking to somehow rise above our human nature? It all feels just a little too hard.

So, if the two obvious responses to the reading are to congratulate ourselves and move on unchanged, or to become almost paralysed by our own unworthiness, perhaps we need to dig a little deeper for a more helpful understanding.

Perhaps the first thing to notice is what is and isn't being said. At no point in this passage does Jesus suggest that there is anything wrong with following traditions. His purpose is not to criticise people's faith practices. The passage he chooses to quote is from Isaiah, and this is what he says:

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in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines."
You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.'

The point Jesus is making is about hypocrisy. About preaching one thing and living out another. About adopting practices which suggest that we believe something, while our lives show something quite different. It's all about purpose and motivation. Before we get too pleased with ourselves for not having the traditions that are being specifically discussed here, we need to remember that our Sunday services include various rituals and practices. While each of us will experience Holy Communion differently, it is fair to say that the way we treat the bread and wine demonstrates that it has a greater significance to us than a dry wafer and a goblet of fortified wine.

Yet there are reasons why we do what we do. First, we were commanded to do so. At the Last Supper Jesus told us to do this in order to remember him. So part of our purpose in celebrating Holy Communion is to remember Jesus. The gospel readings for the past weeks have all been about Jesus as the Bread of Life. In Holy Communion, the act of consuming consecrated bread and wine is a physical sign of where we find our true nourishment. And in breaking bread together, we recognise a unity among us, each fed from the same source.

The significance of Holy Communion will be different for each of us, and indeed we will experience its impact differently week by week and throughout our lives. What is important, though, is that where there is a deeper purpose behind our ritual; where our motivation is to connect with God and one another, traditions and rituals have a validity. Jesus's criticism arises because the scribes and

Pharisees are seeking to hold his disciples to a series of practices for the sake of it. Their interest is not in the deeper meaning behind the rituals, but rather they are seeking to control others. More than that, although they are faithfully following the practices, it seems they are not allowing themselves to be transformed in doing so.

And yet we can't ignore those most challenging of Jesus's words, that it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come. What are we to make of what can feel like such an indictment of our humanity?

Perhaps the first thing to recognise is context. Jesus is speaking to the scribes and Pharisees, who are criticising his own disciples because they are not following a series of rules which would apparently make them "righteous". And Jesus is homing in on their motivation. Those critics are not remotely interested in a better, more faithful world. Rather, they want people to conform to their worldview in order to maintain their power and superiority. Jesus asks them to search their hearts. To be honest with themselves. To understand their true motivation.

And so for us, too. How often do you have an emotional reaction to a particular situation? Perhaps someone says something that presses all the wrong buttons. Or you find yourself riled by the course of events. In many ways this reading reminds us to search our hearts. Sometimes it's quite hard to do so at the time. But perhaps afterwards, when the dust has settled, when emotions are less frayed, it's possible to ask ourselves about our motivation. Not as an act of self-flagellation, and certainly not to lead us to accept abusive behaviour from others in the future, but rather to better understand ourselves and where we might find God in any situation.

While those words of Jesus – that evil intentions come from the human heart – can feel damning, they are not the whole story. Because we are also created in God's image. When God had made humanity, God was pleased. God saw that it was good.

It can be quite easy to beat ourselves up for being human. Whether it is as we are faced with atrocities going on around the world, or simply with our own petty selfishnesses, we might find ourselves feeling downcast.

Yet Jesus doesn't expect us to be anything other than human. When he speaks of the evil that can come from the human heart, it is really more a statement of fact than an indictment. It is a reminder that we are not God, and that's ok. Remember, after all, God knows us, and loves us. As the human beings that we are.

The call is not to be anything other than human. Rather it is to search our hearts. To understand our motivations. And to seek to draw on those other aspects of human nature that are within us, too. We all know the difference that makes. Kindness always matters. And much of our purpose is to seek to draw ever closer to God, and the beauty that lies within.

Amen.