

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

Deuteronomy 4:1-2,6-9; James 1:17-end

I've often liked watching those programmes on TV like *60-Minute Makeover* or *DIY SOS*, where you get expert interior designers and a team of decorators taking a property or part of a house and over a short period of time transforming it into something really glamorous and appealing. The results are usually quite stunning. The thing is, though, however much these good folk make the particular house or flat look nice *on the surface*, the fact remains that underneath it all, the actual basic structure of the property is pretty ugly – it's still the same old bricks and mortar and floorboards.

Now in our Gospel reading this morning, we find that the disagreement that arises here concerns the obsession of some of the Jewish religious leaders of Jesus' day with traditions which focused on *outward* ceremonies, but which failed to really have any impact upon the *interior* – upon their inner selves. These traditions all looked very pious and holy *on the*

surface, but they did nothing to change people *inside* (where it really matters).

Now the Pharisees were a religious group in 1st century Jewish society who were particularly keen on promoting strict observance of various ritual practices amongst ordinary Jewish folk. They were well-intentioned guys, having a concern for the proper worship of God. And in order to achieve their aims, they had a desire to bring the purity practices from within the Temple (the central place of worship in Jerusalem) into everyday life. So ritual cleansing, they believed, caused the people to be pure again.

Now this explains why the specific bone of contention the Pharisees have with the disciples *here* revolves around the issue of ceremonial impurity. Apparently, Jesus' disciples were not adhering to the rules laid down by the elders regarding eating; in particular, they were eating without having washed their hands first. Now the Jewish leaders weren't simply concerned with issues of health and hygiene, as we would be today. No,

this is about washing in order to become *ritually* clean once again. In fact, they washed themselves *and* their purchases on their return from the market, as they believed that they might have got defiled at the market by coming into contact with Gentiles (non-Jews) in the crowd – thus making *themselves* ritually unclean.

Now the crucial thing to note here is that all these ceremonial traditions aren't actually part of the Torah – the divine Law, given by God and recorded in the Old Testament texts. No, what we're dealing with here is what was known as the tradition of the *elders* – the Jewish oral tradition, *added* to the Law as a commentary designed to spell out the details, implications and applications of the Law itself. So much of the lives of the scribes and Pharisees were pre-occupied with such considerations, and so the apparent carelessness of Jesus' disciples in not washing their hands, was bringing this body of oral teaching, which the religious leaders held so dearly, under threat.

In our Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy, Moses instructs the people of Israel that they must obey the commandments given by God in order to enter and occupy the land promised to them by God. Obeying God's commandments would make them a wise people and a witness amongst the nations to the uniqueness of the God they worshipped and the uniqueness of his Law. What's more, they're warned not to lose sight of God's Law, and they're instructed to teach it to each generation. In the midst of all this, though, is the instruction not to add to or take away from God's commandments. But this, of course, is precisely what some of the prominent religious leaders were doing in Jesus' day by placing such an emphasis on the *oral* tradition added to God's Law, that they were losing sight of the essence of what God's Law is *really* all about.

So, in response to the scribes' and Pharisees' criticism of his disciples, the Lord, quoting from Isaiah, points out that by raising the *man-made* commentary on the Law to such a level of importance, making it equal to the *divinely* given

Law, they have actually negated the *real* purpose and spirit of the Law *itself*. They've got to the stage where they can follow their *own* ritual traditions, without actually being committed in their hearts to the spiritual intentions of the Law – what the Law was meant to achieve, namely a life of godliness and righteousness. Basically, they were setting aside *God's* Law – the word of God – in favour of human teaching based upon it.

And then the Lord moves on to the wider issue concerning what *actually* defiles a human being. On the one hand, food entering the body doesn't affect who or what a person is. What enters *in* relates to the stomach – from a spiritual point of view, food is harmless. On the other hand, what comes *out* of a person does indeed relate to the heart – to all the different ways in which a person reveals their character, their outlook and their perspective on life. The problem with the legalistic approach of the Jewish authorities is that it failed to deal effectively with the evils *within* a person – it's powerless to root out those evil intentions within that lead to sexual

immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, folly - because the origin of such evil is within the *heart*, *not* the stomach. Focusing on outward traditions concerned with ritual cleanliness for eating, while neglecting the actual *source* of evil in human life, is of no use at all – it's 'worthless religion', as the Letter of James puts it. It's powerless to cleanse our hearts from where all evil desires and actions originate.

Now the practices of the Jewish leaders referred to here might seem to us, in our present-day culture, and within our Christian worldview, to be quite ridiculous. And we can quite reasonably ask, 'well, what's all this got to do with us?' But when we consider the matter a bit more closely, we discover that there are actually all sorts of *man-made* traditions and practices in the *Church* today which we adhere to. What the Lord is saying here isn't about giving up all tradition, per se. Tradition is, after all, intrinsic to human life – it's not a matter of whether or not we should actually *have* traditions.

But what he *is* challenging us to do here, is to ensure that we keep these traditions in proper perspective. We need to constantly ask ourselves, ‘does this or that tradition actually bring me closer to God?’; ‘does it lead to an inner purity – a purity of heart?’ Do they, in the words of James, help us to “be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger” – to produce God’s righteousness in our lives? Indeed, most of the time our dearly cherished traditions are neutral in this regard – they don’t actually make us any more holy. So, we need always to hold lightly to our traditions, never allowing them to take priority over the word of God. The *39 Articles of Religion* which are found at the back of the *Book of Common Prayer* provide something of a summary of what the Anglican Church teaches, and Article 6 says this:

“*Holy Scripture* containeth *all* things necessary for salvation: so that whatsoever is *not* read therein, *nor* may be proved thereby, is not to be *required* of any man.....”

In our reading from his Letter, James makes it clear what really matters: that we are meant to be a holy people set apart for God, keeping ourselves “pure

and undefiled” and “unstained by the world” – in other words, a people of moral purity – avoiding thinking and acting according to the value-systems of society at large. And we are to care for those in need – the “orphans and widows in their distress”, as James puts it. And it’s not through outward rituals and traditions that we can achieve moral purity and a heart for social concern. But rather we need to “welcome with meekness the implanted *word* that has the power to save [our] souls”, the word of God that indeed has the power to change us.

Now there’s nothing wrong with emphasising a particular style of worship (high or low, formal or informal), or a particular way of structuring the church, or using a particular type of liturgy, or crossing ourselves, or using incense, or preferring a choir, or preferring a worship band.....But the problem is when we begin to believe that these things in themselves will somehow bring us closer to God – as though these things are *necessary* for salvation.

And there's a further challenge for us here, which relates to the way in which the scribes and Pharisees choose to criticise the disciples over this issue of ceremonial washing. During the course of Jesus' ministry, the religious leaders had witnessed the *signs* of the Kingdom of God – the sick being cured, evil spirits being cast out, sins forgiven; and yet all *they* could be bothered about was the disciples' failure to wash their hands before eating – *this* was more important to them! Their traditions blinded them to the amazing things that God was doing amongst them in the person of Jesus Christ. *We* too must get *our* priorities right, so that *we're* not side-tracked from what really *is* essential, and thereby fail to open our eyes to what God is doing in the world *today*.

So, we need to treat our various traditions with caution – making sure that we don't become obsessed with them. We need to focus rather upon those things that do *indeed* lead to *inner* purity – a purity of heart – to *true* holiness. And this comes *not* from outward formalities, but through Christ's

sacrifice of himself made once for all upon the Cross, through the transformative power of God's word implanted in us, and through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, changing us more and more into the people God wants us to be.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we pray that you would keep us from adding to or taking away from your word, which is our wisdom and understanding. Grant us the discernment to distinguish between *your* commandment and human tradition, so that we may be holy and without blemish before you. We thank you for your saving and transforming word. Plant your word deep in our hearts; help us to hear your word, to receive your word and to be mindful doers of your word. In Jesus' name. Amen.