

St George's Anglican Church Malvern

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost Year B 30 August 2015.

Deuteronomy 4.1-2, 14-23 Psalm 15 James 1.17-27 Mark 7.1-8, 14-23

Many years ago now, when I was the Associate Dean of the Melbourne College of Divinity as it was then, I was asked to go to the Yeshiva in Bondi Junction in Sydney. The Yeshiva was seeking accreditation with the NSW Government for their course of studies and I was to be a member of the Panel making a recommendation to the NSW Department of Education. A yeshiva is a Jewish tertiary level college where seriously orthodox students study intensively over four years, learning the Hebrew scriptures and learning what the sages have said about them over the centuries. Students argue back and forth in the best traditions of Judaism: answer a question with another question; if one rabbi say *this*, quote another who says *that*. It's rigorous and it's robust. The Yeshiva wanted a diploma level award, which they were granted. Given the long hours and years of study I rather thought they should have applied for a postgraduate degree straight off!

It was a fascinating day and I enjoyed the task. At lunchtime we were served kosher food off course and it was announced 'It's washing to the elbows'. Some of the Jewish members of the panel went off and washed according to their custom.

'Some of your disciples', the scribes and Pharisees said to Jesus, 'Some of your disciples do not wash before they eat', implying some of your disciples fail to live according to the traditions and so they eat loaves of bread with defiled hands. And these hostile religious leaders demand Jesus answer their question. Jesus is not meek and mild when he responds. Jesus retorts that the elders, quoting Isaiah, have already 'sussed out' the kind of people these Pharisees and scribes are – they are hypocrites. Now, that word comes from Greek theatre. It means a person who is wearing a mask to conceal their identity. Jesus is saying to his opponents that certain foods and how food was eaten had been made a kind of scapegoat, with the food being blamed for causing defilement, no matter how dark the heart of the one eating them or refusing to eat them. The Pharisees were hiding behind the food, wearing a mask of purity rather than allowing their identity as sinners in need of God, like everyone else, to be seen. So Jesus says is plainly: it's not the food you take in that is the problem, it's not actually even what comes out as a result that is the problem; it is the human heart that harbours the evil intentions that cause the harm.

Jesus means that sometimes strict adherence to traditions can mask a judgmental and rigid morality that imagines all that is wrong with the world is wrong with others. Such people fall into the trap of asserting that certain behaviours, certain desires and certain attitudes make other people bad while they themselves, who refrain from these things, are only good. It's a false dichotomy – 'them' bad, 'us' good. Individuals do it; communities do it; whole nations can get caught up in this destructive dynamic. It's the dynamic Jesus is talking about when he urges us not to point out the speck in another's eye while we fail to see the log in our own. Just as certain foods do not make us clean or unclean, good or bad, so other people do not make us unclean either.

But tell that to those opposed to the mosque in Bendigo. Yesterday the Anglican Cathedral there put up a sign asking people to 'pray for the peace of Bendigo'.

Tell it to those who imagined that Border Force could stop anyone in the street they chose and check on their citizenship or visa status. One friend of mine posted a yellow star on the internet. It can be printed out and then a person writes in their passport number, ready to wear it on the streets. A harsh comparison you might think, but an effective reminder of how far scapegoating can go.

The problem is the choosing of what and who to call 'unclean'. Who do Border Force imagine might be overstaying a visa – not I dare say, tourists of Anglo-Saxon appearance who are indistinguishable from citizens. The reason so many people reacted so quickly is because they saw the old scapegoating game writ large and refused to play.

It's not in itself wrong to worry about how we are managing the enormous social changes that are taking place in our society. We are living in times of huge shifts – let's name a few: more people are refugees and displaced now than since the end of the second world war; safe, reliable oral contraception has altered the experience and even the meaning of a sexual relationship (not always for the better, I accept) but irrevocable now; religious people of all kinds claim marriage is a gift of God for all people and now our society is grappling with what 'all' means; the extent of violence even in families shocks us and the abuse of the vulnerable, children and the elderly especially, distresses us. Nothing wrong in itself at being disturbed by any of this.

The hypocrisy comes when we blame others for our anxiety; we say that things would change if 'they' went back to where they came from; or 'they' are the cause of our anger, or even our hatred of them as if *they* have caused our hearts fail to be wise, loving, non-judgmental and just in our dealings with them. When we put on the mask of our own goodness alone, we deceive ourselves. When we open ourselves to see as God sees, things can begin to change.

Abandoning the commandment of God – to love God and love our neighbour as we love ourselves – abandoning that for the xenophobic traditions and habits we sinful humans create, that is what defiles. And even the best religious traditions may become a mask if we do not pay attention. Jesus was not pitting himself against Torah and tradition but he was asking those opposed to him – as he will time and time again - what is more important? Is it the observance of all the rules, or the observance of the two great commandments?

As if to demonstrate the truth of his challenge to his opponents, following this hostile encounter in today's reading, Mark's telling of Jesus's story will have him go into Gentile territory. First he will meet the Canaanite woman whose daughter is ill; the woman will ask Jesus to heal her. At first Jesus will refuse - but come back for more of that next Sunday...

The so called Collect for Purity, a treasure of Anglican worship, says it all really: if we really pray this, really pray it, we will gradually be changed, and so will those around us as we take back our projections.

Almighty God,
to whom all hearts are open,

all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hidden:
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy name,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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