

Trinity 14 [Proper 17 (B)]

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 2 September 2018

Readings: James 1 verses 17-end and Mark 7 verses 1-8, 14, 15, 21-23

For most of this year, the Gospel readings have been from St Mark's Gospel, but for the last few weeks we have been following the long chapter 6 of John's Gospel - Jesus' wonderful discourse about himself as the 'bread of life', one of the typically Johannine 'I am' stories about Jesus.

Today we return to Mark's Gospel and to a rather over-filleted and difficult reading about the problems of *ritual* cleansing - not normal hygiene. Each of the Gospels was written originally for a particular community - although the four Gospels we find in the Bible were judged to be of such significance for the whole of God's people that they found their way into the Bible - the canon of Scripture, given the authority of the Church as an authentic representation of the voice of Christ and the experience of the first Christians.

It seems to be clear from this passage that the community for which Mark wrote was seeing a struggle over kosher food. In other words, there was a debate over whether it was necessary for non-Jews, Gentiles, who became Christians to take on the full weight of observance of the Old Testament Law over such things as dietary rules and regulations. We see this debate continuing in the early church in the Acts of the Apostles and in St Paul's letters. As Mark's Gospel was probably written down in its final form at the same time as Paul was writing his letters, it is not surprising that Mark should include this dialogue between Jesus and the Pharisees.

What seems to be going on in this encounter is that Jesus is condemning overly narrow interpretations of Scripture as frustrating the real thrust of God's Word. The problem of the human estrangement from God precipitated God's intervention in history with the incarnation, the birth of Jesus. Behind this was that problem that the minute detail of the Law was so excessive that men and women could not possibly follow the Law either as we find it in the first books of the Old Testament or - even more so - as it was interpreted by the Jewish theologians and lawyers, an oral tradition of interpretation which Jesus clearly found very difficult. Jesus clearly states that the Law was not intended to enslave men and women, but that has been the effect. St Paul turns his mind to this in his letter to the Romans - which shows us that the struggle continues for some years after Jesus' resurrection in the early and formative years of the Christian church.

The passage of Mark's Gospel that we have heard this morning is, frankly, difficult. The main reason for this is simply that we are not troubled by the concerns that Jesus was addressing - unlike the early Christians for whom this was a matter of real debate. Mark appears to have put together a whole host of material to explain to his readers that the detailed food laws that had come down through Jewish tradition are not binding on Christians. Mark characteristically presents Jesus' teaching in stark form: Jesus condemns both Pharisaic profiteering and the small-mindedness of human tradition which contrast to the radical demands of the whole of Scripture. Indeed, the final verses of this morning's reading expand Jesus' statement that 'there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile'. We cannot blame outside forces because 'it is from

within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come.’ Jesus lists these ever present human failings, concluding, ‘All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.’

To put it simply, we must take responsibility for our own actions, and shape those actions through our constant wrestling with Scripture.

This point is made equally clearly in the reading from the letter of James. We will be reading from James over the next few weeks. This letter was included in the canon of the New Testament quite late on in the final shaping of the New Testament - and with some reservations expressed about its appropriateness. Martin Luther famously described it as an ‘epistle of straw’ because James says nothing about the death and resurrection of Jesus and, in Luther’s view, contradicts the true gospel of ‘justification by faith’ by preaching mere ‘works’. But this letter is a highly ethical work, and James begins by stating a clear Biblical principle: that our aim is to imitate God in whose likeness we are created. For James, Christianity is a way of life before God - and it is a way of life that requires a change in attitude from the normal selfish human way of living. Instead, we are invited to focus on the relationship with both God and other people that Jesus proclaims in everything he says and does. ‘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.’

What is at issue both here and in Jesus’ encounter with the Pharisees and scribes is the inconsistency of human behaviour. The target is the would-be religious person who is more concerned with human rules and regulations than the primary requirement to be ‘imitators of Christ’, who seek to follow in the way that Jesus shows us.

The problem with the oral additions to the basic Law that Jesus questions is the problem that we always face with tradition. The challenge is to keep tradition, whatever it is, in perspective, so that it does not hinder a living relationship with God – but, instead, reinforces it.