

It is uncommon to see a Christian with a dirty face, especially on a Sunday morning. There are exceptions, of course: but most Christians take pride in the appearances they maintain. They scrub up for worship. Perhaps they believe the old adage, “Cleanliness is next to Godliness.” An outer tidiness can reveal an inner order; everything is in its place. An extra shot of hair spray defies the world’s bluster. Sunday clothing will be kept stain-free as an expression of holy intentions.

Cleanliness has a venerable heritage in the religious life. The Psalmist asked, “Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? Who shall stand in God’s holy place?” The answer was obvious: “Those who have clean hands and pure hearts” (Psalm24:3-4). Outward hygiene aims to express an inward grace.

Maybe that is why the Pharisees and scribes took issue with Jesus. They asked, “Why do your disciples eat with dirty hands?” This was more than a concern of city people about fishermen, carpenters, and labourers. It was a spiritual matter. There was a long tradition among the religious leaders of Jesus’ day. In an effort to bring every untidy life before God, the leaders insisted on washing one’s hands, rinsing one’s food, and scrubbing clean all pots, pans, and utensils. This was the way that pious people showed how they honoured a holy, clean God.

It is a tradition that continues in some places. These days, any pilgrims who wish to pray at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem must follow a set of stringent rules. The most pious believers are directed to a fountain with tin cups on vandal-free chains. They rinse their hands seven times to signify their ritual purity. Who shall approach the remaining wall of the Jerusalem Temple? Those with clean hands and pure hearts.

The issue here is the state of the human heart. Jesus brings up the matter of the heart with his quotation of Isaiah: the hearts of “this people” are far from God (Mark 7:6b). “This people,” it becomes clear in verse 14, includes not just the scribes and Pharisees. As Mark writes, “Then he called the crowd again and said to them, ‘Listen to me, all of you, and understand’ ” (Mark 7:14). Jesus is speaking here to all who are gathered around him, including, presumably, the sick whom he had just healed and the people who had carried them to him. What they must understand is that it is not what you take into yourself that renders you impure, but rather “the things that come out are what defile” (Mark 7:15). Whatever your practice, Jesus is saying, whichever traditions you do or don’t uphold, these are not the things that, by themselves, get you ready for God’s kingdom. And you must be ready now.

It must be noted that Jesus does not proclaim the heart to be utterly corrupt. Good intentions also come from the heart. But Jesus’ audience need to hear this, so that in this crucial time no one is distracted by extraneous arguments, but all are focused on preparing their hearts, and thereby their entire selves, for the kingdom of God.

We do not know why Jesus permitted his disciples to eat with dirty fingernails. Most of them were country people, like Jesus, and perhaps they ate without formality. What we do know is that this entire chapter of the gospel of Mark is a conversation about purity: Who is dirty and who is clean? What behaviour is right and which actions are wrong? What food can we eat and what must we avoid? If we are called to live before a holy God and live in God’s purifying light, what does this mean for our behaviours, habits, and practices?

Let me say that this is a refreshing conversation. A lot of people live as if God is only concerned about a small segment of their lives. On this Sunday our Gospel is calling us to reflect and consider our whole commitment to God which is effectively, treasure, time and talents. We need to make decisions, spend money, and pursue habits as if God is always in sight, and at the very heart of our lives, not just the peripheral loose change. As our Church continues God’s work in this community we have to meet the challenges of regularly gathering together, the costs of ministry, whilst at the

same time being good outward charitable giving Christians. This requires a lot of treasure, talent and time. We are blessed with many kind givers of time talents and treasure and to God we give hearty thanks for all generous people past and present. Our Gospel says that we have to consider this as the priority, not the many distractions that we are tempted to pursue.

There is a great disconnection in the Western world and Australian life: What happens on Sunday has no bearing on the things we do on Monday morning or Saturday night. We have received the water of baptism but we have not remained clean.

A little later in this chapter of Mark, Jesus names some of the dirty things that can swirl around inside any person. His warning gives me pause and I begin to notice the many small moments when life is cheapened. The next-door neighbour gets a fancy new car and we begin to wish for one too. That's envy. A healthy self-esteem grows like a weed into all-consuming arrogance. We think we are the only ones who can do good in our Church- and discount other people's generosity, that's pride, the root of all sin.

In a country church in England the congregation sat on the left side of the centre aisle for the first part of the service. After standing for the second hymn, the entire congregation commuted across the aisle for the remainder of the service. A visitor inquired at the church door about this unscripted practice that everybody but the unsuspecting visitors knew.

The Vicar explained the church had an old wood-burning furnace beneath the left side of the Nave. It warmed up the worshippers, who then got too hot, so the congregation ritualised the temperature shift by moving across the aisle. (Can't imagine that happening at Holy Trinity Kew with our heating!?) "The temperature seemed fine to me," said, an observant guest. It was then the priest mentioned that a new furnace had been installed fifteen years ago.

Many of our rituals and habits begin for good reasons. At their origin, they are full of power, relevance and sometimes significance. They provide guidance and structure until the bottom falls out of them. Or we can repeat the rituals so any times that we forgot why we do them.

"Jesus, why don't your disciples wash their hands before they eat?" The Lord responds to his critics, not with a defence of poor hygiene or ritual defilement, but by hurling the word "hypocrites" into the air. There will be no play-acting before God, he declares, no lip service, no peripheral loose change to God. We love God with every human capacity or, we do not. We give generously to his cause or, we do not. We revisit our habits to continually discover the living heart at their core, or we develop useless routines that bear no real purpose and only breed dysfunction.

The Gospel this morning, reminds us of what is most important, and as all of us really know in our Christian life, periodically we need to go through a reformation. In a deep effort to move closer to God, we need to remove every empty or bad habit, every dead ritual, and every spiritual distraction. What we want is God - a first-hand experience of God. Anything that stands in the way will have to be pruned away. Today is a wonderful opportunity on this Sunday to consider the importance and priority of giving in our lives, to examine and strip away at our priorities in life. As our Parish faces the challenges of the next few years it is important that we consider deeply our own commitments to our God and Church so that we will continue to be able to offer a viable ministry to the people of Kew and its surrounds.

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