

Sunday 29th August. 13th after Trinity. 8am and 9.30am

A reflection on Mark 7:1-8, 14, 15, 21-23

By Corinne Craymer

I want to begin by reminding ourselves that we have all responded to God's call on our lives to come and worship Him here, in church, this morning. Now, this may sound rather obvious but it actually tells us something about our heart's desire. We have chosen to come and be on Holy Ground for an hour, rather than lie in bed with a cup of tea and a Sunday paper. Something of God's grace has touched our hearts and our decision-making.

Today's reading from Mark's gospel shows Jesus addressing three groups of people: The Pharisees and scribes, the ever-present crowd and his twelve disciples. The discussion today is about the very complex food and hygiene laws that the Jews adhered to and ultimately what Jesus says about how to interpret them.

The Pharisees, who are always waiting to catch Jesus out, are gathered around him and watching how some of his disciples are eating with unwashed hands. This is, they say, a travesty of the tradition to always give the hands a ceremonial wash, alongside many other traditions related to food and eating.

'Why do your disciples not live according to the traditions of the elders?' they ask. O dear, this is like a red rag to a bull to Jesus. According to Mark's gospel, Jesus has been very busy feeding five thousand people, calming a storm and healing people in the market place. But the Pharisees want to get him on a technicality. If you have ever spent an hour cleaning the kitchen and someone in the family says 'I thought you were going to empty the dishwasher!', you might get close to how Jesus was probably feeling.

He replies with a familiar confusing answer, quoting from Isaiah about people honouring God with their lips but not with their hearts. 'You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition', he says. Notice that Jesus does not say that Moses Law is irrelevant: but it is not enough. Spiritually and morally, what goes into our mouths is not as important as what comes out of them!

Jesus is criticising the traditional teaching of the Pharisees because it's based on superficiality and not taken to heart. Jesus' teaching really gets to people because it is different and helps us to see why we need to change. After all they are the powerful words of God to us. Remember in the Parable of the Sower the different things that compete for space in our hearts.

And then he embarks on telling them a holy truth: that it is evil that comes from the human heart that defiles a person not what they take in. The decisions we action, and the choices we make, show us and others where our true heart lies. The heart affects the whole person. It is the centre of our human will, our

rational lives, our spirituality and our desires. It is the place where good or bad intentions usually begin. Our minds may transform sinful thinking, but the heart is the birthplace of them.

Jesus turns the whole idea of consumption and consumerism that defiles completely on its head. Each of the vices Jesus names is somehow connected to consumption-adultery, theft, pride, envy, meanness with money-all connected to grabbing, taking, owning, and devouring.

So how do we learn to desire as God desires? How do we know what God wants from us?

When the structures and formulations of the Christian message and types of service become more important to us than worshipping God anywhere and anytime, we have a problem. When our own needs become more important than the needs of friend neighbour and family, we have a problem. When we are financially rich and spiritually poor, we have a problem. God's desires are missing from our lives.

We are called to become more like Christ and it is in our hearts that God's kingdom begins to flourish. There are many things that will help us to reach out to God but I offer us two things this morning which we can go back to again and again for help and direction. One is The Lord's Prayer which we will shortly be saying together. Each line of it tells us what Jesus says we need to ask God for.

The other is the beautiful teaching that Jesus gives sitting on a mountainside in which neither human traditions nor personal consumption have a place. Teaching which suggests strongly, that a heart of gentleness and compassion, of humility and mercy are key to understanding the reality of God's kingdom:

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven

Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted

Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled

Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy

Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God

Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven. Amen.