

Doing and thinking what is good

Sermon 29 August 2021, All Saints' Cottenham with Rampton

Alison Wedgbury, Licensed Lay Minister

Bible Readings: Mark 7.1-23, James 1.17-27

Introduction

Today we are thinking about how to:

1. not get caught up in human rituals and forget God's purpose
2. avoid being hypocritical in our actions
3. confidently follow Jesus by doing **and** thinking what is good.

On the face of it, the Gospel reading from Mark is about excessive, some might say obsessional, washing. Here is the first part of the Gospel reading for today, in family-friendly words that we use in Junior Church:

Mark 7.1-5

Some Pharisees and scribes gathered round Jesus.

Angrily, they asked him,

*'Why do your disciples eat
without following the ancient ritual*

of washing before eating?

It's disrespectful to God!

They thought this made the disciples bad people.

Mark's Gospel tells us that the Pharisees were very strict about washing hands, washing meat, fruit and vegetables from the market, washing cups, pots and pans, especially those to be used in the Temple. A couple of years ago, we might have thought

'Those Pharisees were way over the top!

*Surely a speck of dirt didn't matter **that** much!'*

But now, in 2021, in the middle of a worldwide pandemic? Might we have some sympathy for those Pharisees and scribes? If Jesus's disciples were in charge of the catering at All Saints' today, would we really want to eat food that they had prepared with dirty hands? Probably not.

More seriously, because of the Coronavirus pandemic, it's a very good thing that we have been carefully respecting everyone's different views on hygiene in church services and events. We are very much aware that people have very good reasons to protect themselves and others. We do not criticise people who are not yet ready to return to mixing with lots of others in a church building.

In Mark's Gospel, some Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem do criticise Jesus and his disciples, in public. They declare that Jesus and his disciples are not living in the right way. Jesus challenges them and calls them hypocrites. He says they are twisting God's commandments for the sake of rituals. Jesus also tells us not to copy them in private, in our hearts or in conversation with other people. That really would be hypocritical, talking one way and acting another way.

Here is the second key part of the reading:

Mark 7.14-15

Jesus replied,

'The prophet Isaiah was talking about people like you, when he said:

"God says this: some people just pretend to respect me. They are only worried about rules and what people will think of them.

Their lips honour me, but their hearts are far away from me."

Sometimes there is a danger when we hear Bible readings about Jewish people and their rituals in the 1st century. We must avoid thinking that they all misunderstood God's purpose. Jesus was reminding **some** people, **some** Jews, who had got stuck in **some** rituals for the sake of those human rituals. In many ways, Jesus was not saying anything new. Like many Jewish scholars he wanted to highlight the difference between everyday 'ritual', that is 'bodily' impurity and the 'moral' impurity in people's hearts and minds. The Jewish prophets of centuries before him regularly warned people against exactly the same thing. Jesus knew the Hebrew Scriptures in detail and actually quotes Isaiah 29.13:

The Lord said:

Because these people draw near with their mouths

and honour me with their lips,

while their hearts are far from me,

and their worship of me is

a human commandment learned by rote;

Let's think about rituals and rules. I believe that regular patterns in church services are very useful. We wouldn't be the Church of England otherwise. It's helpful to have service books that we use every week, to find old familiar words and sometimes new ones we hadn't spotted before. It's useful to have familiar hymns and to hear new ones too that explain the same worship in new words. Language changes over the years. Today we may talk about 'discipleship', 'principles' and 'values' much more than 'sin' and 'tradition'. But sometimes they mean much the same thing.

It's also valuable to experience different church services from our own. This summer I spent a couple of weeks working at the retreat centre in Devon I'm connected with. Worship there is always very diverse as volunteers and guests come from all church 'traditions' and indeed sometimes from other faiths. Christians include Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, Roman Catholics, United Reformed, from the UK, Europe and worldwide. Worship was in the enormous, new, open-sided barn where the farm tractors and other machines usually live. The barn has a good roof but plenty of ventilation was guaranteed – and it did rain a few times! There was daily Morning Prayer with words drawn from very varied sources. There was daily 'traditional' Compline every evening. There were a couple of special Communion services. In one of them we celebrated all the volunteer activities of the week, including gardening, sheep herding, catering, painting and lots and lots of washing up. My involvement in the service was to light some frankincense in the brass censer to represent worship. That didn't immediately make me into a High Church Roman Catholic. But actually it was rather lovely as the smoke and perfume wafted across the barn over our heads into the sheep field!

Of course, there **are** very good reasons for all the ways we do services at All Saints' in Cottenham and Rampton, some historical, some practical, some local decisions and some deeply theological. Ideally, all church practice is about our relationship with God and Jesus. All church practice is also about what we do in our everyday lives during the week. In the next part of the Bible passage, Jesus says this:

Mark 7.21-23

Jesus continued:

'Listen carefully.

Nothing that goes into a person's body from the outside can make them a bad person.

But the words and actions that come out can be bad.

Goodness comes from the inside.

What's important is what's in your heart.'

In the time of Jesus people believed that good and evil literally lived in the heart. We tend today to think that our brains or our mind are responsible. But are we so very different from 1st century Jewish people? We still talk about having a 'good heart' and the symbol for love is often a heart shape.

Next the really tough words of Jesus. He makes us think about a long list of 'evil intentions'. They are the timeless evils of human life:

fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride and folly.

Can we honestly say none of those have ever come out of us?

Even just a little bit?

Even after we've been really, very, very religious on a Sunday morning?

People do notice when we act holy but say or do things that are not like Christ. Mahatma Gandhi once said:

*I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians.
Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.*

To help us, the first reading we had today was from James 1, vv.1-27. It was all about the true way to worship God and be doers in the world.

'...caring for orphans or widows who need help; and keeping yourself free from the world's evil influence. This is the kind of religion that God accepts as pure and good'.

Wonderfully, it turns out that what God wants us to do is also good for us.

It's good for our physical health, mental health and spiritual health.

In the Church Times on 20th August there was an article about research headed:

'Doing good does you good'.

The research found that across the world, doing good for others (or altruism) comes top for individual well-being and mental health.

The research concluded:

*It's in our innate nature to build a better world...what's good for everyone is also what's best for each one of us.
Everyone gains when we open our hearts to others and to all life.*

So, finally, here are some key messages.

1. Let's value our own church experience.
2. Let's also respect differences.
3. If others think or say that we Christians are hypocrites in our everyday life, they may be absolutely right.
4. Luckily God and Jesus know that we are not perfect.
5. Jesus encourages us to love and to practise doing good.
6. God has confidence in us.
7. That gives us confidence in ourselves.

As the brilliant preacher Barbara Brown Taylor wrote recently:

The Christian dream is to love each other in ways that mystify our neighbours on the off chance that it will do a little good.

This will take practice.

This will take crazy confidence in the Spirit.

*Above all, this will take people like us,
who are brilliantly equipped to make a difference in the world.¹*

Crazy confidence in God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

That's what we need.

People like us.

We can all have it.

Because we follow Jesus.

God has confidence in us.

We can all do it.

¹ Brown Taylor, Barbara, *Always a Guest, Speaking of faith far from home* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2020)