



## Revd Ro's Reflection on The 13th Sunday after Trinity

### Proper 17 Year B

James. 17-27

Mark 7. 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

We have been looking at St. John's gospel for the past few weeks, now we return to Mark's and we rejoin it after the passage we studied on Proper 11. The text carries on unbroken from that.

It has been a long time so it's worth recounting what had just happened. We had the account of the murder of John the Baptist by Herod, the return of the twelve from their successful first mission, the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus walking towards the disciples on the Lake. Chapter 6 finished with the account of the crowds flocking to Jesus and accounts of his healing ministry.

The chapter shows Jesus as someone who is able not only to heal but who is in control of the forces of nature. John shows Jesus explaining to the crowds that demanding signs is not what it is all about. His signs are for a reason, they point to God and to himself as from God.

There is no doubt about it Jesus' fame is spreading but it is not only the ordinary populace who are flocking to him, here in the opening sentence we sense danger.

<sup>7.1</sup>Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem'

So then Jesus' fame was well known in Jerusalem. The Pharisees held power and they did not want anyone else exercising control over the people. Here is a rival and a dangerous one. Just who is he, who does he say he is? Their first job is to discredit him in the eyes of the crowd. What better way than to expose him as someone who is breaking the law.

The Jewish nation had been invaded and conquered numerous times; they had been taken into captivity, restored to their homeland, though still under a conquering power. The latest in the line of invaders were the Romans who controlled the country with an iron fist. The 'Pax Romana' was kept at a high price in human suffering. The one thing that the Jews could keep was their religion, their law. It marked them out, it gave them their identity even in a conquered land. They were God's chosen people, the law was God given.

Originally of course the law was the Ten Commandments given to Moses by God. Down the centuries these had grown into countless laws and codes. By Jesus' time the powers that be were manipulating the laws and using them as a tool of control.

The laws evolved for a purpose. When I was an English teacher I regularly taught 'Lord of the Flies' for GCSE. It is about a group of boys stranded on a tropical island. The boys have to make their own rules for their society to live by. I remember asking my class what rules they would make and then they had to explain why they had chosen to do so. Of course the rules they made were for the good of society and for the protection of the people within it.

The law of the Jews was given for the same purpose, for the good of the people but as with all civilisations those in power are able to manipulate things for their own good. Thus the law became a burden to people, in some respects they were hamstrung by it.

We remember a similar occurrence in Mark 2,

<sup>23</sup> 'One Sabbath he was going through the cornfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. <sup>24</sup>The Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?' <sup>25</sup>And he said to them, 'Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? <sup>26</sup>He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.' <sup>27</sup> Then he said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; <sup>28</sup>so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.' The last sentence is the crux of it of course.

Actually the Pharisees are only trying to catch Jesus out. To discredit him before the crowds as one who is breaking God's law. In this instance it is the purity laws that the Pharisees cite.

<sup>7.2</sup> 'they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them.'

This law was created for reasons of hygiene and of course it is quite correct and necessary.

I expect for us living now during the era of COVID19 the passage will conjure up the phrase, 'Hands, Face, Space.' Certainly this was law at one time, and actually it is worth thinking about how many lives were saved by this directive. Now we are asked to use this directive responsibly and remember it in our behaviour. Quite apart from that cleanliness is behaviour that is learned from the cradle up. Cleanliness is vital to the health and wellbeing of any society.

It is worth pausing for a minute though to notice Mark's comment,

<sup>3</sup>(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; <sup>4</sup>and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.)'

So Mark is not writing just for a Jewish audience who would know the law. He is writing for Gentiles and is explaining Jewish tradition to the early church.

Jesus sees through the Pharisees like a window. They are not bothered about anything except trapping him and trying to persuade the crowds that this man is not worth following because he is not a devout Jew in that he is letting his disciples break a minor law.

Besides which the Pharisees are not really bothered about the law. They are quite happy to manipulate it if it suits their purposes, either as a tool of control or to suit themselves. Jesus' answer makes this quite clear. We remember that he called them 'whited sepulchres', in Matthew 23 he says

<sup>27</sup>Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness.' That is exactly it, on the outside they appear squeaky clean but inside they are full of corruption. It is more do what I say rather than do what I do as far as the Pharisees are concerned.

Here Jesus roundly turns on them and calls them 'hypocrites.' He quotes from Isaiah 29.13

<sup>7.6</sup>"This people honours me with their lips,

but their hearts are far from me;

<sup>7</sup> in vain do they worship me,

teaching human precepts as doctrines."

<sup>8</sup>You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.'

He not only condemns them but uses scripture to do so. He is of course vindicated by this and they are condemned. He explains further, though these verses are omitted from our passage. He gives the example of how they break the commandment 'Honour your father and your mother.' They have invented a clever ploy saying whatever money could have supported parents is now an offering to God so they don't have to support their parents!

<sup>12</sup>'then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, <sup>13</sup>thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on.'

He follows up with an accusation, 'And you do many things like this.' Jesus is adept at turning the tables on those who try to trap him; he shows them up for what they are. Now he goes further by addressing the crowds,

<sup>14</sup> 'Then he called the crowd again and said to them, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand:

<sup>15</sup> there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.'

This in itself is a bold statement but Jesus does not explain his words to the people. He leaves it at that and goes into the house with his disciples. Once again we have the scenario where Jesus is shocked that the disciples, his nearest followers, those who have heard his teaching, seen his 'signs' still do not understand him so he explains to them but not to the crowds. The crowds need to think things out for themselves. The disciples need to understand. There is not much time.

The point is this, eating various foods does not and cannot defile a person. It is what comes from the heart of a person that can defile them. I said last week that evil is a powerful force and that there is the capacity for good and evil within every person. That of course is what the book 'Lord of the Flies' explores. That is what Jesus is addressing here. He asks them to think deeply and to understand that the evil actions which emanate from a person defile them.

<sup>21</sup>For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder,

<sup>22</sup>adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. <sup>23</sup>All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.'

There is another point too, Jesus has said that food cannot defile. And Mark adds this in brackets, ('Thus he declared all foods clean.') Now that is important, Mark is writing his gospel around AD70 for new Christians, Jews and as we have seen by his explanations of Jewish law Gentiles too. Well Jewish food laws and whether they should be observed by Gentile Christians was of great concern and argued about in these early years so those words, 'He declared all food clean' are pretty important. The Gentiles are equal to Jews in the sight of God; well they should be free from Jewish law too. They must be rooted in the Jewish scriptures which point to Jesus but free and not bound by another faith's traditions.

Christianity sets people free from bondage, free from the powers of evil but there is a continual struggle against the powers of evil. That struggle is ongoing; if we follow the way and teaching of Jesus we overcome it through love.

Jesus is making a further point though. The law is not an end in itself. The Pharisees are treating it as the be all and end all. Jesus sums up this point in, 'the Sabbath was made for humankind not humankind for the Sabbath.'

He has not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it. That is the central point, all the Jewish scriptures point to the coming of the true king, the Messiah, the one who will destroy the powers of evil and bring in the kingdom of God's rule and his new creation. The Pharisees are so busy seeing the detail they cannot see the Messiah when he stands before them and what is more they are trying to blind others to the fulfilment of God's promises in Jesus. Jesus is bringing in the kingdom of God, he is the fulfilment of the scriptures and the scriptures should be the guide and pointer to Jesus.

The passage from James really follows on wonderfully from this. We'll see how in a minute. Our passage begins at verse 17 and so misses the start of the letter, always a difficult thing.

The letter of James begins,

<sup>1</sup> 'James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion:'

Who then was James? There are three associates of Jesus called James, James the Great, apostle and brother of John (incidentally we take the dedication of our St. James Spital Chapel to be to him, James is the patron saint of pilgrims and 'Spital' has its roots in the word hospitality. One of the roles of Spital Chapel would have been a chapel which gave rest to pilgrims, probably on their way to Lichfield.) There is James the Less, again an apostle, son of Alpheus and finally James the Just, the brother of Jesus. He is the likely candidate as he was head of the church in Jerusalem and taught and worked tirelessly for the new Christian movement from there. He writes to the new Christians whom he sees as the 'new version of the twelve dispersed tribes of Israel.'

James begins by giving encouragement to the new Christians,

<sup>2</sup> 'My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, <sup>3</sup>because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; <sup>4</sup>and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.'

He knows that these new Christians will face trials; that does not simply mean persecution but the temptations from within and the trials and sadness of any human life. These new Christians must be grounded in God. Of course prayer and trust is vital,

<sup>5</sup> 'If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. <sup>6</sup>But ask in faith, never doubting,'

This is the passage which immediately precedes our reading today and it links with the gospel passage.

<sup>13</sup>'No one, when tempted, should say, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. <sup>14</sup> But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; <sup>15</sup>then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death. <sup>16</sup>Do not be deceived, my beloved.'

That is the point, God is pure goodness, and Jesus is pure goodness. Evil comes from without and within and is expressed in sinful actions. It is the job of every Christian to resist the power of evil by being rooted and grounded in Christ. Turn your back on sin and turn to Christ is James' message.

I think the opening of our passage for today is one of the most beautiful I know,

<sup>17</sup> 'Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. <sup>18</sup>In fulfilment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.'

Every good action or thought is from God who is goodness. God does not change, he is the constant light that enlightens all people. We can't help being reminded of John 1 though John was the last of the gospels to be written. This image of God's light is such a powerful one and echoes throughout the Christian scriptures. To this early church the word scriptures would mean the Jewish scripture, our Old Testament; they must be rooted and grounded in those for they are the foundations of the faith and as we saw in our gospel, reading point to Jesus as Messiah.

Our gospel passage links so well to this. Jesus has explained that it is what comes out of a person that can defile. Conversely again what is born of a pure heart are true and kind actions. The one is the antithesis of the other. Good actions are born of the goodness of God; it is a Christian's job to reflect the ways and teachings of Jesus.

Certainly there is the capacity for evil in each human being and James and Jesus are saying do not blind yourself to the danger of this. Do not be hypocrites like the Pharisees, be on your guard against evil deeds.

<sup>19</sup> 'You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; <sup>20</sup>for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. <sup>21</sup>Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.'

We can connect this to last week and Paul's image of the whole armour of God; it is the 'imparted word of God' that has the power to save souls that helps protect the Christian from evil without and within. James gives some wise advice. Listen, be slow to speak and I guess think before you do and be slow to anger. Anger has a place, Jesus got angry on occasion. But anger is a great danger too. Anger is rarely pure and is not easily controlled; usually it does more damage than anything. Temper it with wisdom, patience and thought, then speak your truth quietly but firmly and never collude with evil. Never stay quiet or say nothing 'for peace's sake.' Stand up for what is right.

Wickedness has no place in the Christian's heart or in what they do. The problem is it begins in small innocuous ways, like seeds. But once wrongdoing takes hold it grows. It has to be weeded out. That is not easy but it is necessary, we do it in God's strength but the battle is constant. We were made in God's image; we are co-heirs with Christ and anything impure has no place within us.

James is quite clear at the beginning of his letter about the theme that will run throughout,

<sup>22</sup> 'But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.'

Jesus says this time and time again. It would have fitted in splendidly to Jesus' words to the Pharisees in the gospel passage. It is not enough to hear the word of God and think that's it then, or worse still be like the Pharisees who bend the word of God to their own will then go off and do as they like. If you are a Christian you are required to live it out. Anyone who does not is merely fooling themselves but you can't fool God who knows us intimately. So James spells it out further,

<sup>26</sup> 'If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup> 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.'

If you do not act according to Christ's teaching but according to your own wilful ways which are contrary to Jesus' way then you are not a Christian is hard hitting stuff. But James is not mincing his

words here. Live out Christ's teaching, care for people, think of others before yourself and help them. Fight against what is wrong.

Again this passage would be at home in our gospel passage,

<sup>25</sup>'But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.'

It is succinct teaching; this is 'the perfect law' the way of Christ and it leads to freedom. How in our lives do we measure up? It is the challenge of Jesus to us.

*'From strength to strength go on, wrestle and fight and pray; tread all the pow'rs of darkness down, and win the well fought day.'* Charles Wesley

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