

August 29, 2021 - 14th Sunday after Pentecost - Sermon

Song of Songs 2:8-13; Psalm 48:1-2,7-10; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

“How Shall We Live?”

I have been using the imagery of a journey with Jesus in my sermons a good deal lately because that image has been what I've been using in my personal meditations. I've tried to imagine what it might have been like to be one of the disciples of Jesus as they moved from city to city and brought God's ministry to those they met. Now Jesus' primary task was to do what God needed him to do to deal with the problem of sin but he was also demonstrating what effect the kingdom of heaven would have on the earth. What it was like to see, in person, the works of God as manifested by Jesus is a work of our informed imagination. I have found it to be a fruitful form of meditation and so I invite you to come along with me into a meditation inspired by the Gospel passage assigned for today's celebration.

St. Mark is the author of the story as he reports about the events that took place in Jesus' ministry. By this stage in his account Jesus has fed a multitude, sent his disciples on a mission trip, healed a demon possessed man, and restored life to the child of a synagogue ruler in addition to other signs of the kingdom of heaven drawing near. These signs of God's kingdom on earth are only some of the ways in which Jesus' ministry impacted the world in which he walked. News of his work had traveled as far as Jerusalem and it had begun to raise some questions in the minds of the scholars and religious leaders in that part of the nation.

As this work drew the attention of the Pharisees in Jerusalem a group of Pharisees and scribes was sent, out of curiosity and a desire to identify a potential threat to Orthodox Judaism, and this group made their way to the northern part of the country in order to obtain some first hand information. As they observed the work and teaching of Jesus they noticed that the disciples of Jesus did not follow the strict customs of the Pharisees and they drew that fact to Jesus' attention - particularly about hand washing. We know from other portions of scripture that Jesus respected and followed the Law of Moses and, in fact, he sometimes strengthened the understanding - the way he did with the commandments about adultery and murder. (See the sermon on the Mount - Matthew 5-7) However, Jesus didn't always respect and follow the customs which had grown up around the law and the hand washing requirement was certainly one of these things. I imagine that when hand washing is necessary, as in preventing the spread of disease, Jesus would support that but ritual washing that seems to only have the purpose of impressing others with your piety was not endorsed by Jesus. Remember what he said in the Sermon on the Mount about giving or praying on the street corners in order to be seen by others. (Matthew 6) Jesus used the question to point out that the Pharisees had added human practices that were not always helpful

to the Law of Moses. He quoted a passage from Isaiah to illustrate the point and then strengthened it with the statement “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile”. (Mark 7:14) The focus, as always with Jesus, is on the heart from which is to flow the behaviour God wishes.

I believe this is an important principle to remember. Our rituals can be useful to us and help us remember the teaching of Jesus but they are not to become an end in themselves. The ritual washing was instituted to remind the people of the importance of keeping their lives clean but it had become a reason used to criticize others. In the Book of Common Prayer Archbishop Thomas Cranmer’s original preface begins with the words, “There was never any thing by the wit of man so well devised, or so sure established, which in continuance of time hath not been corrupted” (BCP p. 715) The behaviour of the Pharisees and Jesus’ comments are echoed in the Archbishop’s opening words. The washing of hands was probably instituted for a very good reason but, in this case it would seem, the ritual itself became the reason. I think the point Jesus was making was that even those with scrupulously clean physical hands can harbour filth in their hearts. Just because we remain faithful in our Church attendance is no guarantee that our hearts are clean. It is a warning to be mindful that evil comes from the heart of human beings who have not been internally cleansed by the Holy Spirit. The external things are much less important than the process of the changing of hearts in which God is involved.

As we imagine ourselves on a journey with Jesus we are asked to remember that it is this change of heart to which we are called. Jesus wanted to transform the lives of his disciples in order for them to bring God’s message to the world. He was showing them, among other things, that allowing the Holy Spirit to remove and cleanse those things which defile will enable us to walk in God’s ways. Some rituals may indeed help us to do that but we are cautioned to remember Isaiah’s warning from God. “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.” (Isa 29:13) While liturgy and rituals are a major part of our lives as Anglicans, and that is a good thing, we frequently need to remind ourselves (or be reminded) that liturgy and rituals are merely pointers to the person of Jesus and the message of God’s good news. Our rituals have changed because of the pandemic but the God to whom they point has not changed.

The journey we are on also involves the other portions of scripture that come into our lives. Today we move from hearing from St. Paul to hearing from St. James and I find that this letter makes a good counterpoint to the message found in the passage from St. Mark. You see, a lamp that is not put on a lamp stand is not much good for anything and a follower of Jesus who does not do anything with the changed heart he or she has received is not doing everything possible. The well known line from James’

letter is 'faith without works is dead'. James was not disputing Jesus' teaching but he is stressing that what is in the heart because of God needs to be allowed to come out. "Be doers of the word and not hearers only" James says which is also what Jesus says on a number of occasions. The ritual of cup washing and hand washing practiced by the Pharisees was not resulting in the light of God being shared and that is part of the main point. If our rituals and liturgy are not resulting in people with changed hearts going out into the world we may need to look carefully at what it is we are doing. Our favourite hymns are not just there for us to enjoy - they are meant to stir us into godly action. Those prayers we say each week can descend into empty words unless they prompt actions of justice, mercy, and forgiveness. This journey we are on with Jesus is a journey of discipleship during which we are learning more and more of what it means to be servants of God.

And so, as we move on from wherever this week finds us, let us resolve to pay some attention to our hearts. Jesus suggests that all sorts of wickedness can flow from a human heart but he also holds out the promise that our hearts can be cleansed, transformed, over a period of time in order to make us more able to live in the way God wishes us to live. As the people of God who meet in this particular place I pray that as we journey with Jesus we become more and more like him and experience that heart transformation promised by God.