

A MATTER OF THE HEART

Deuteronomy 4. 1-2, 6-9

James 1. 17-27

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

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

All of us, whoever we are, have our own preferred way of doing things. Take cooking, for example. I wouldn't be surprised if each of us could think back and remember how as we were growing up, a particular way of preparing a certain dish was a long-standing family tradition. For those of you who are like me and who have a sweet tooth, think of the wonderful desserts that our mums prepared for us. Take trifle, for example. In your home, was it always served with raspberries? Or with several kinds of berries? Or with jelly and sponge? Each of us has our own story to tell. For some of us, perhaps our family stories aren't about desserts; they might be about what we always did when we went on holiday; or the way we celebrated Christmases and birthdays. But the fact is, all of us have grown up surrounded by traditions. Traditions are important. We find meaning in them. We like to preserve them and to pass them on. They define us somehow.

The Jews of Jesus' time were no different. They had their own traditions, and as we have seen in chapter 7 of St Mark's Gospel, their *religious* traditions concerned many things. Because the Jews were a people that revered God, they were very concerned about personal purity; and they followed a number of rules, or traditions, that had been developed by legal experts called scribes that were designed to help them follow the Ten Commandments and the first five books of the Old Testament. These rules

and instructions were not written down until long after the time of our Lord. They were part of what is called the oral law; they made up the “tradition of the elders”¹.

In this tradition there were, for example, definite and rigid rules for the washing of hands. This hand-washing was not undertaken for hygienic purity, but rather for ceremonial cleanliness. Before every meal, and between each of the courses, one’s hands had to be washed, and they had to be washed in a certain way. First, the hands were held with the fingertips pointing *upwards*, and water was poured over them and had to run at least down to the wrist. Whilst the hands were still wet, each hand had to be cleansed with the fist of the other; and the fist of one hand was rubbed into the palm and against the surface of the other. This meant at this stage that the hands were wet with water; but that water was now unclean because it had touched unclean hands. So next the hands had to be held with fingertips pointing *downwards*, and water had to be poured over them in such a way that it began at the wrists and ran off at the fingertips. After all that had been done, the hands were clean.

In Jewish eyes, to fail to do such hand washing was not to be guilty of bad manners, but to be unclean in the sight of God.² When the Jews said that something was “unclean” or “defiled”— be it your hands, the cooking utensils you used, or whatever — it meant that those things were “common”; that is, they were available for general use, rather than being particularly “set apart” or devoted to God. And this is why the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were concerned about our Lord’s disciples eating with unclean hands.

¹ The “elders” were not the officials of the synagogue, but rather the “ancients”, or the great legal experts of the old days, like rabbis Hillel and Shammai. Much later, in the third century after Christ, a summary of all of these rules and regulations was written down; and the summary of them is known as the *Mishnah*.

² The Jews believed that anyone who ate with unclean hands was subject to the attacks of demons and could become liable to poverty and destruction. Bread eaten with unclean hands was not better than excrement.

But in spite of their seemingly good intentions, the Jewish leaders had taken their zeal for the respect of the law and transformed it to include rigid and strict observances of *traditions* that they themselves had created. The end result was that they were misusing the law – and these traditions – for their own purposes. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, they held to human traditions and actually abandoned the commandments of God.

The point that our Lord really wanted to make before the Pharisees and the teachers of the law is that *all religious tradition* – and indeed *all of our approaches to God* – are to be measured by one barometer; that is, inner purity. It is the condition of our hearts that counts.

If we look at this passage closely, we begin to understand that the heart is very much the centre of a person's life. It is the seat of human activity and emotion. It is in the heart that the battle is fought between good and evil. People have the choice of giving praise and thanksgiving to God from their hearts³; yet from the heart also flow evil inclinations and rebellion.⁴

In his criticism of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, Jesus was not rejecting the law, nor was he rejecting the Jewish rituals of consecration and purification. But he was clearly putting an emphasis on the cleanliness, or the purity, of the heart, rather than outside rituals. A 'show' of being clean is just pretence.

In our gospel text, our Lord calls the Pharisees 'hypocrites'. Originally, a hypocrite was a play actor; it meant one who pretends or gives a set reply. It came to mean a

³ Cf. Isa 30: 29; Pss 9: 1; 13: 5; 16: 9; 19: 8; 28: 7.

⁴ Cf. Gen 6: 5; 8: 21; Pss 55: 21; 66: 18; 78: 18.

person whose life is without depth or sincerity. Those who go through the religious acts or rituals without a relationship to God are hypocrites. Cleanliness does not depend upon whether we have washed or eaten; it depends on our inner attitudes, on our thoughts and our hearts. As we present ourselves this morning in worship, let us give ourselves – and our hearts – afresh to God.

Amen.