

Hinde Street

Sunday 30th August 2015 10am

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

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, ²they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ³(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴and 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.) ⁵So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?' ⁶He said to them, 'Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; ⁷in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines."⁸You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.'

14 Then he called the crowd again and said to them, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.'²¹For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²²adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.'

Sermon

This week, figures released by the Department for Work and Pensions showed that over a period of two years, 2,380 people with disabilities died within two weeks of being assessed as fit to work, and losing their benefits.

Also this week, in Austria, a lorry was found abandoned at the side of the road. Inside were 71 dead refugees. They had all suffocated on their long journey to the west.

We have a system of *work capability assessments* which decides who does and who doesn't deserve to receive *employment and support allowance*.

We have a system of EU rules and visa allocations which decides who is and who isn't allowed to come and make their home in our country.

And yet systems and rules are fallible.

There are human casualties.

There is real suffering.

In today's lectionary reading, Jesus is challenged by the scribes and the Pharisees because his disciples do not wash their hands properly before eating.

This takes me right back to my childhood, and my mother asking me if I had washed my hands before I sat down to dinner.

And done up every button on my coat before I left for school.

I saw the point of hand-washing.
But not the buttons thing.
This was always a great point of controversy.
And instead of saying, 'Yes Mum', and undoing the buttons once I was safely on my way to the bus stop, I would always stop and argue.
What's the point?
Why do I need to do up every button?
It's not that cold today!

But of course it wasn't about keeping warm.
It was about my appearance.
Coat neatly buttoned.
Hat on like a nicely-brought-up grammar school girl..

The handwashing in this story is not about hygiene.
It is, as Mark points out, about the tradition of the elders.
Like doing up my coat.
It's about observing the proprieties.
Looking right.

But as Jesus points out, we have a propensity to use traditions, rituals, the outward appearance of things, looking right, to cover up what's really going on.
Just as my mother knew I was a bolshie teenager, but she wanted me at least to look like a nicely-behaved, middle-class girl.

In the section which our lectionary has left out, Jesus points out the way in which the Pharisees avoid supporting their elderly parents, by claiming the money they would have given them is dedicated to God.
You use the rules, he is saying, to condemn others for not washing their hands.
And then you exploit the same rules for a kind of personal tax evasion.

The food you eat, the cleanliness or otherwise of your hands – that's not what makes you unclean.
It's the stuff inside.
Not inside the stomach, the gut, the digestive system.
That doesn't matter.
It goes in and comes out.
(The lectionary has omitted that verse too, since it mentions toilets. Not suitable for church!)

What matters is the stuff inside the heart.

It's easy to see this as yet another defeat for the hypocrites in the religious establishment.
They say one thing and do another.
They pretend to be pious, but they are really selfish.
They fixate on minor points of etiquette, but ignore the key principles of love, of generosity, of inclusion.

But, as always, it's not that simple.

Mark was writing for gentile converts to Christianity.

Whether or not to observe all the minutiae of Jewish law was a hot topic.

Could they be real Christians if they were not, first of all, real Jews?

And the purity laws had a point.

They were first developed to distinguish the people of Israel from the surrounding tribes.

They were about preserving their identity.

A need to know, to prove, to demonstrate that they were chosen.

That they had a special relationship with God.

But as so many of the prophets had pointed out, God wanted God's people to show they were different by the way they behaved.

Not in terms of what they ate, or how many times they washed their hands, or whether they did up their coat buttons correctly, but in terms of how they behaved to others.

In particular, whether they welcomed those who were not economically self-sufficient.

In their day, the widow and the orphan.

The foreigner.

That was the kind of identity God was looking for.

And that's what Jesus is reminding the scribes and Pharisees about here.

Do your rules and rituals reflect the love of God?

The God of love?

Or are they convenient ways to hide your essential selfishness?

And we need to ask the same questions of our society.

Are our welfare rules, our immigration rules, designed to make this a fair, a welcoming, a generous society?

Or are they designed to maintain the status quo for the haves, and continue to exclude the have-nots?

And perhaps we need to ask the same questions of our church too.

This week the Hinde Street Inclusive Church group met for the first time.

We say we are inclusive.

We have signed up to the Inclusive Church movement.

But are we really inclusive?

Are the rules and rituals of Hinde Street designed to help everyone feel that they belong?

Or are they designed to maintain the comforting and comfortable church that we know and love?

I don't know the answer.

But the important thing, as today's story makes clear, is to keep asking the questions.

Not simply to ignore or disregard human precepts and the tradition of the elders.

Not simply to criticise those that want to preserve them.

But to ask, and keep on asking, whether our inherited traditions reflect the God we worship.

And to think too about the traditions we are creating for the future.

Amen.