

Sermon on Sunday 1 September 2024

by Melanie Seward, Lay Reader

Readings: James 1:17-end and Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23



Nurturing the heart

(...rather than keeping the rule book)

This week, I listened to a programme that talked about puppetry. As a child (and a parent), I sat on many a sandy beach captivated by Punch and Judy, ready to react to all the characters; warm greetings to Judy and boos for Punch and the Crocodile who stole the sausages? All the characters were stereotypes (goodies and baddies) and we knew how to react. Sometimes, we can find ourselves reading the bible like this. We view some of the characters as 'others', as not being like us, when the truth is a little more complicated.

In church, we are tempted to greet the Pharisees and the Scribes with boos. The word Pharisee has been turned into an accusation. 'You Pharisee' is aimed at those felt to be self-

righteous, sanctimonious, holier than thou, certain in their moral superiority, satisfied in their certainty and smug with it. In the Gospels, Jesus calls them hypocrites and vipers and the spiritually blind. Interestingly, Jesus would have been very aware that the origins of the Pharisee movement was all about maintaining the precious relationship between God and his people. The law or commandments were a gift from God, to enable the people to order their lives according to God's will and so bear witness to the glory of God to others.

God tells the people of Israel that they are to be "a priestly kingdom and a holy nation". For the Pharisees, this meant that the (Exodus 19.6) laws concerning priests serving in the temple should apply to all God's people and all aspects of life. The priests serving in the temple were required to wash their hands before entering the holy place or offering a sacrifice, the Pharisees believed that all Jews should wash their hands before meals as a way of making mealtime sacred. They wanted people to bring God into all aspects of life. Now, these traditions of the elders were not being kept by **all** Jesus's disciples, so they figured that Jesus was not respectful of the law, picking and mixing, implying an individual could decide on the situation.... He seemed to think he was above the law, whereas.... they knew best: keeping rules was part of taking faith seriously.

What does Jesus do? As a good rabbi, he quotes from scripture: "This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines" (Isaiah 29. 13).

Rules by human beings had become the yardstick for judging whether someone was sinful or faithful, whether they were in or out, an evil influence or a force for good.

Jesus says, think again, living a good life or a godly life is not about keeping rules about whether you wash hands and what you eat – it's not about the ritual cleanliness and the separation from others who do not do the same – life is all about the heart.

In the Bible, the heart is more than a mechanical pump – it houses all the values and qualities that govern and control our thoughts and actions. As such, it is susceptible to influences that might jeopardize its integrity. Jesus says evil intentions come from deep within us and it's these that lead us to do sinful or evil things – not just the obviously evil but also deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly – these all make us unclean or create in us a life that takes us away from loving God and serving our neighbour.

All sins listed in verses 21 and 22 arise from our own desires. The letter of James recognises our capacity to be tempted by our own desire, being lured and enticed by it, until it takes the form of sin, and it is the sin that that can cloud our vision of God and weaken faith. So, how do we nurture our hearts to ensure they generate good desires?

We can be watchful of the factors that can lead to the creation of ungodly desires:

Success and achievement bloating egos to diminish the value of others;

Selfishness leaving no space to feel compassion;

Laziness that brings inaction and suffocates the will to serve others;

And Stress that undermines our ability to trust ourselves, one another and God.

Creating our own reminders, routines and practices can help with this. 'Rules' in this sense can be helpful:

- I will put aside Sunday for worship and family, my work will move to one side.
- I will go for a stroll, on my own or with the buggy, and I will switch off my phone and think about things with God.
- I will check once a day that my neighbour who is struggling is ok.
- I will re-read the pew sheet and re-read the prayers and bible passages, or perhaps look at the sermon again on email or the website.

We should not be passive in nurturing our heart. The journey of faith takes a lifetime, yet it is vital to remember that living with God in this sense is not a consequence of our own actions but is because of God's love for us. James reminds us that all good gifts come from God and that there is no shadow of turning with him. What does this mean? God is on our side. He sends his Son to show divine love and then to die that we might experience forgiveness and live a new way of living. God is constant and won't give up on us.

We can pray and ask for the gifts of Humility, mindfulness, compassion, repentance and trust – if we turn to him, God's spirit will enable our hearts to open and to grow towards his desires; that we might feel loved by him, love his Son and show love to others – to be changed from the inside out.

Let us ask God to direct our hearts and for us to allow His love to permeate every aspect of our lives. His love is not like human love. It's unconditional, unfathomable and unchanging.

Note

- 1. The Pharisees were members of a party that believed in resurrection and in following legal traditions that were ascribed not to the Bible but to "the traditions of the fathers". Like the scribes, they were also well-known legal experts: hence the partial overlap of membership of the two groups.*
- 2. The Book of Proverbs 4.23: 'Guard your heart above all else'.*