

2021-08-29 ... 8am Communion Sermon ... Revd Canon Judy Hunt

Mark 7: 1 – 8, 14 – 15, 21 – 23

'Fruit of Religion'

Prayer

Adherence to religion – religious practices – can have negative outcomes as well as positive.

The picture presented in our Gospel reading is religion for the Pharisees, as fence building. Religion as separation. And Jesus – never one to mince words – calls it what it is. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, he rebukes the Pharisees, saying: **“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.”**

It's important to note that Jesus doesn't condemn ritual hand washing in this story. He doesn't argue that all religious traditions are evil. What he indicts is the legalism, self-righteousness, and exclusivism that keeps the Pharisees from freely loving God and loving their neighbours. What he calls out is their elevation of rite over mercy, heritage over hospitality, ritual over compassion. What he grieves is the Pharisees' compulsive need to police the boundaries of their religion, based on their own narrow definitions of purity and piety.

It's easy for us to look down on the Pharisees, as if we in our enlightened modernity would never make their mistakes. But it's always worth being open to the challenge of Jesus. It reminds me that the Archdeacon of Suffolk that I took over from had entitled his last sermon 'Policing the boundaries' as a description of his ministry!! I think they found me rather different ... I hope so anyway!

So, what can we do? How can we discern whether our way of doing religion is life-giving or not? Jesus gives his listeners this advice: **notice what comes out of you. Notice what fruit your adherence to tradition bears. Does our version of holiness lead to hospitality? To inclusion? To freedom? Does it cause our hearts to open wide with compassion? Does it lead other people to feel loved and welcomed at God's table? Does it make us brave, creative, and joyful? Does it prepare our mind and body for a God who is always doing something fresh and new? Does it facilitate another step forward in your spiritual maturation?**

Or does it make us small, stingy, and bored? Fearful, suspicious, withholding, and judgmental?

Like everything else Jesus offers us, his confrontation with the Pharisees is an invitation. It's an invitation to go deeper – past lip service, past tradition, past purity, past piety. It's an invitation to practice what this week's epistle calls **“pure religion”**. A religion of love for the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the outcast, and the enemy. A religion of trust in a surprising, innovating, and ever-creating God. The God of heritage and history, yes. But also the God of an ever-living, ever-changing **now**.

Adapted from: Debie Thomas: Journey with Jesus - Current Essay