

Proper 17 Year B 2021

At the beginning of the Covid outbreak, one of the things we were most pressed to do - pressed very hard - was to wash our hands; soap, running water, take your time and do it thoroughly.

And then do it again, and again, and again. It was all about hygiene. When the Pharisees accuse the disciples, and by implication Jesus, of not washing their hands before eating, hygiene doesn't come into it. It is about custom and therefore about control and especially about boundaries. Purity Laws in a society or culture regularly reflect the concerns which that society or culture has about its own boundaries. If a society feels under threat, as Israel felt under threat from the Romans, it will reinforce its purity rules as a way of insisting to itself, and to anyone else who pays attention, that it really is what it should be. The lesson is obvious. The Jews in the Middle East had for centuries been surrounded and infiltrated by paganism, both as cultural force and as military might. What more natural than to reinforce the purity codes which said, in the powerful language of control culture - 'We are Jews. We are different. We don't do things your way, we do them our way'. And of course, this would

be particularly important to the guardians of purity. You harden the border and pull up every drawbridge.

The kingdom movement of Jesus was threatening to breach the borders, pull down the barriers. By the time Mark is writing his Gospel, Gentiles as well as Jews were following Jesus - and the purity codes could not be applied to everyone - the barriers had been breached. Mark's next story emphasises this, as you will hear next Sunday. And mark's little aside - that all food was declared clean - is intended for his own community, a mix of Jew and Gentile. Both the Acts of the Apostles and the writings of St Paul show us how this issue of clean and unclean remained explosive in the early church - and if you think that we wouldn't make a fuss about things like that today - think again.

We still erect barriers to keep 'the other' out, and convince ourselves that we are somehow different, and for different, read 'better, or even 'superior'.

The basic point Jesus is trying to make is that purity laws, including those around food, don't actually touch the real human problem that the kingdom of God addresses. Jesus switches the discussion from hand washing and choice of food to life style choices and actions, the things of the heart - heart being a

metaphor for what motivates us. It is not your diet that interests Jesus; it is your heart condition. What defiles a person is not what he takes in but what he gives out; goodness is rooted in the inner disposition, not in outward observance. And for many what Jesus said was bad news because it contradicted the traditions which they honoured - and it made life more difficult; you couldn't hide behind an 'I obeyed the rules' mentality.

Once again the disciples don't understand and Jesus has to explain. The implication of his teaching is that the Pharisees and scribes who confound Jesus are themselves defiled, in spite of their handwashing, their adherence to tradition, by the malice that is within them, whilst Jesus and the disciples are undefiled because ritually impure food, that eaten with unwashed hands, can defile nobody. It is as if the Pharisees have ritually clean hands because they never take them out of their pockets to help anyone.

But we shouldn't think all rules are irrelevant - that would make life a free-for-all. St James implores his readers to 'to look into the perfect Law, the Law of Liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget who doers who act', because, he says, those who do will be 'blessed in their doing'.

We are going to be exploring the Letter of James over the next few Sundays, so it might be worthwhile, during the coming week, to sit and read it in one go. It is only five chapters, just over one hundred verses - one mug of coffee should do it. I like the Letter of James; it is full of practical (almost OT) morality; it echoes the teaching of Jesus; it is beautifully written and easy to read - you don't need a degree in NT theology to understand what he is on about (this isn't Paul at his most complex). I think you could say it is the NT equivalent of the Book of Proverbs. James and his readers represent a very early Christianity that emphasises prayer, morality, action and loyalty to the teachings of Jesus, calling him Lord and looking for his return. And his advice, in this opening section, is very clear - don't lose your temper and do good. James urges us to be quick to listen, slow to speak - put your brain in gear before opening your mouth, people used to say. He realises that human anger will not produce results that make things right. Listening and being listened to open the door to the righteousness of God for us, as a covenant community.

Like Joshua and the Israelites whom we came across last Sunday, we have to make a choice - will we 'rid ourselves' of all that is

contrary to the will of God (v21) and will we 'welcome with meekness the implanted word which has the power to save (our) souls'? The choice is ours. The word has been implanted, given to us, by the Father of lights. Do we welcome it, make it grow, bring forth its fruits? Do we become 'doers of the word'? For James, faith without works is dead.

As the Israelites came out of slavery in Egypt they were a motley people who needed household rules to form them into the people of God; we call it Torah. James does not want his people - the new Israel - to forget that looking into the Law of liberty will provide rules for nurturing neighbourly love - life enhancing, not life restricting. He calls us to be responsible, taking seriously our emotional lives, our religious faith, our behaviour, as signs of God's new creation in Jesus.

He has sent us a letter - I hope you read it.