

Hands up if someone has ever said this to you before eating: "Have you washed your hands?" Keep your hands up if you have been the person who said it. It's not such a bad thing is it? Hygiene helps good health. You enjoy your food and company better if you've prepared yourself for the meal, and if you know that everyone else has too. So there's nothing so very wrong with what the Pharisees and scribes pointed out to Jesus. Any parent would have been right there with them.

If that's the case then we need to look very carefully at the way Jesus responded when the fact that his followers hadn't washed according to the rules was brought to his attention. What's important here is that this was not about hygiene. The washing of hands before food might have started that way, but that's not what the Pharisees were worried about. It was a holiness issue. And like many religious practices it began well.

The holiness of God and the purity of worship in the Temple was marked by the priests and worshippers preparing themselves spiritually and making this visible. They made sure they wore the right clothes, said the right things, ensured there was no dirt on them, and checked that they had not been in contact with anything unclean, like a pig or a dead body. The Judaism of Jesus's day had taken this further and brought it into everyday life, not just temple worship. People were encouraged to be holy in everything and all the time, being clean on the outside as a sign of being clean on the inside. You didn't know what had been in contact with your food in the market, so you showed your love of God and adherence to the law by making even that holy, as well as what you brought to the Temple.

So far, so good. All of life is worship. What Jesus points out is that a discipline intended for good reasons can all too easily be used negatively too. What starts as a sign of love for God becomes a weapon with which to attack others. The rule becomes an 'in/out' thing. If you do it then you show you are in. If you don't then others can declare that you're out, and they can feel better about themselves in the process. It doesn't take long for the rule to become more important than its origin. Because the rule is visible and tangible it's easier to concentrate on getting it right than on understanding what it points to, why it's there. You might have clean hands, ritually, but your judgmental attitude is a long way from a holy God.

Jesus gets right to the heart of this when he quotes Isaiah at them, calling them hypocrites in the process. He says that they are playing at loving God. It's all about the externals, not the heart. In a verse not used by the lectionary he reminds them that one commandment says they must honour their parents, but a later rule allows them to avoid having to spend money on them when they need it. They are clean according to the rule, but their motivation is all wrong, and their holiness is for show, not for real. He uses their desire for discipline to reveal that the externals have got the better of them.

And that's really worrying for anyone who wants to be holy, because we do have to practice it, we do have to create good habits, we do have to give ourselves rules. There are all sorts of things we do, or don't do, which are about helping us to do this belief thing, this faith thing, better. What about coming to church each week? What about making sure we pray at some point each day? What about reading the Bible? What about making sure we use our money correctly? The disciplines are about shaping our heart, training our souls.

And they carry over into what we believe to be important about how we act, what we wear, who we talk to, and what we do or don't do.

The trouble is that those things can become so fixed that we end up being more worried about them than the reason we do them. There have been all sorts of things down the years that are examples of what Jesus called 'human precepts [becoming] doctrines'. Whole churches and denominations have been split over attitudes to gambling, or alcohol, or whether women should wear hats, or whether certain people can marry certain other people, or whether you can listen to a type of music, or shop on Sundays. It is clearly good not to trust to luck, or seek fulfilment in a different kind of Spirit; it's good to be careful about how we present ourselves, to shape our artistic loves and emotions towards God, and so on, but when we make the good a rule, then it's far too easy to judge people who have formed a different view.

I think there was an element in the Pharisees which was genuinely baffled that anyone could eat an apple from the market without washing it, the rule was so ingrained. But the Gospels are also keen to tell us that the Pharisees had become completely judgmental and condemning. The practice of religion was all there was. They were disconnected from the heart and the spirit. When a different practice came along they could not fit it in to their world view, and when you don't understand you fight. Think of church arguments about furniture or music or liturgy or clothing. The Pharisees gained their self worth from what they attacked, not from what they commended. That happens in churches today. Honestly.

Jesus says 'look inside. What is in your heart?' And if you don't like it, do something about it. Yes, apply some disciplines. Have some rules. But only to change your heart, not satisfy your ego. If your rule connects to the heart of love and forgiveness and reconciliation and healing which God gives us in Jesus Christ, then great. Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, says Paul to the Philippians. But if your rules just make you feel better about yourself and show everyone else in a poor light, then throw them away. Make sure your doctrine is sound and your precepts are light on their feet. That goes for churches too. Our news is too good to slap people down. Thanks be to God who welcomes, heals, cleans and restores. In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.