

Deep cleansing ...

... but only by looking to the cross of Christ.

A sermon given on Thirteenth Sunday After Trinity, 29th August 2021, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in the Online Attended Communion Service

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

If I might begin by asking a personal question, I wonder how much attention you pay to cleaning yourself up? I wonder how much you spend on soap and shampoo; on face wash or shaving cream; on deodorant and perfume; on detergent and conditioner; on make up and hair dressing? Donald Trump apparently spent \$70,000 on hair dressers when he was on reality TV, so I wonder how much you spent on presenting your best face to the world. Yesterday I took a wedding at Tickton and everybody looked absolutely beautiful. The ladies all perfectly made up and wearing stunning dresses. The groom and his attendants all in specially tailored suits and the groom's suit even had the date of the wedding embroidered into the lining. The only problem was the wedding was originally booked for March 2020 and then got postponed because of the pandemic. So I did suggest that the ceremony might be invalid because of a sartorial clerical error!

We all know how to present our best face, but how well do we know how to clean ourselves up inside? How much attention do we pay to removing the stains which blot our hearts and personalities? Probably not so much. As a culture we're obsessed with image: politics and entertainment and marketing are all about presenting the right image. The surface impression we make matters. Part of the reason why we pay so much attention to outward things is because we want to avoid the stuff inside us that feels more difficult, like it won't change. We can to some extent control how we look to the outside world, but it's hard to change the ugliness inside. So often we paper over it and try to ignore it. I came across a splendid piece of verse. I won't call it poetry, but a splendid piece of verse the other day which makes just this point:

I am dousing myself with cosmetics

To stop me from smelling so strong.

Max Factor, Gillette

*I've tried them all, yet
I'm convinced that something is wrong.*

*I go into Boots every Wednesday.
The assistants are ever so nice
And there I buy Brute
To make me smell cute
And help me to kill off the lice.*

*But still I know something is missing.
I've ended up racking my brains.
I even tried Vim
Which was pretty dim
Because now I just foam when it rains.*

*So dear, Estée Lauder, please tell me
The body shop couldn't decide.
Is this just a phase
For I've got to erase
The sweat stain that lies deep inside.*

In the gospel reading, Jesus is highlighting this gap between outward appearance and inner reality. For the Jewish people in Jesus's time, this was even more of a problem than it is for us, because the Jews' emphasis on rituals of washing and outward cleanliness - it was nothing to do with personal hygiene, it was meant to represent and symbolise their inner purity and Holiness as the people of God. So for there to be a disconnect between the outward show and the inner reality was even more problematic for them than it is for us. But they pretended everything was all right and they criticised Jesus' disciples for not performing the correct outward rituals without bothering to look at their own hearts. So Jesus calls them out for their hypocrisy.

And this is the language of sin. The New Testament often speaks of sin in terms of a spiritual stain, an inner uncleanness, in contrast to the purity of heart which God designs. And we in our day have become very uncomfortable about talking about sin. If you suggest that anybody might be a sinner, you're likely to be accused of being judgmental and intolerant. But sin is actually quite a good word for describing

how many of us feel inside: inadequate for the challenge of living the way we really want to; tainted by the things we've done in the past; longing to feel innocent and free once again; helpless to clean ourselves up and to change by ourselves; alienated and estranged from what we feel must be most real.

And instead of talking about the problem of sin, we now talk more freely about the problem of poor mental health, which shares some of the same territory. Feelings of failure and low self esteem, of anxiety and alienation, which we associate with poor mental health are also traditional symptoms of alienation from God, that is 'sin'. I'm not saying they're exactly the same thing, but there is quite an overlap. And whilst medication and therapy and healthy relationships can help us to manage our mental health and help us to function, deep down many of those feelings don't go away.

Jesus, I think, would applaud our greater willingness to acknowledge our vulnerabilities and talk about them. But he still might want us to face the fact that the inner soul isn't just the place of hurt and injury, it's also the place where evil thoughts begin, where we harbour hatred and jealousy, anger, greed, pride and deceit. And perhaps we are a bit less open about those things. But they're still there and they still pollute us. And we still don't know how to get rid of them.

We deal with our sinful hearts a little like we deal with oil slicks in the ocean. When a tanker goes down and the coast is threatened with miles of oil slick, they spray detergent on it. But contrary to popular belief, the detergent doesn't make the oil disappear. It just breaks it up enough so that it sinks down on to the sea bed. It's out of sight and doesn't cause so much visible damage to the beaches and the sea birds. But it's still there, clogging up the seabed. In the same way when it comes to the pollution in our hearts we're skilled at pushing it down into the depths, but it's still there distorting and staining our relationships with ourselves, with one another, with our planet, and with God.

So where can we find the deep cleansing that we need? How can our destructive thoughts and attitudes be put right? Who can clear up the slick covering our souls? It is no accident that the start of the Christian life is marked by baptism, an act of cleansing, of washing and renewal. When a person turns to Christ, they are washed clean. And there may be many here today who were baptised long ago, but who need to know afresh the cleansing power of God's forgiveness. You need to know that Jesus has taken your sins away. You need to know it's not just in your head as

you recite the Creed, but in your heart. You need to know the cleansing and freeing power of God's love for you. Your sins can be taken away, but not by looking in the bathroom cabinet.

You'll find that deep cleansing only by looking to the cross where the Son of God himself poured out his life in love so that the sins of the world, yours and mine, might be taken away. And we come to the Lord's table this morning seeking that cleansing and renewal. It's a deep clean which can come only as we allow our outward image to be stripped away as we place ourselves in Christ's hands, just as we are -without deceit, without pretence, without conditions.

He has given himself for you and for me out of love: receive him and give yourself to him in the power of that same love; be cleansed; be made new; be set free and follow him.

Reading Text

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, ² they 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; ⁴ and 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. ⁵ So 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?’ ⁶ He 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.”*

⁸ You 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: ¹⁵ there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.’

²¹ For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²² adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.’