

Do not forget what God has done ...

... Do not let your hearts become hardened

A sermon given on the Fourteenth Sunday of Trinity, 1st September 2024, by the Mission Priest, the Revd Eileen Connolly, in Beverley Minster

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

I have had a long and undulating journey to ordination. I don't come from a Church of England background. I was brought up a Roman Catholic, and I spent many years in a Pentecostal Church. When I went to see the bishop, it was only right that they said, "You need to extend your knowledge of the Church of England." And so I went on a placement to a very high, almost Catholic church, but within the Church of England. Now, this church had a team of readers and priests and retired priests and were well-versed in procession and pomp. They took great pleasure in 'incensing the gospel' and it was brilliant. But I remember my first visit there. I went into the vestry and I asked this elderly reader, "Can I put my coat in the wardrobe?" "No, of course not" was the reply and she made me put it on a chair. But I remember (and I'll never forget) how unwelcome I felt in that church and I was thinking about that as I was looking at these readings today, how sometimes in our efforts to get our religious rituals and traditions perfect we are in danger of missing the whole point of our worship.

Now in the first reading the people of Israel were about to enter the promised land. They were at a key part in their history. Moses had given them the law of God, and he was reminding them to remember everything they had learned in their 40 years since being slaves in Egypt: remember what God has done, don't forget; don't forget that you were once slaves in Egypt; don't forget how you saw with your own eyes how God delivered you; don't forget about the plagues and about the Red Sea, how that parted; don't forget how you saw others die, but God rescued you; don't forget how the Lord has kept his promise and that you are now free people; speak about it; tell your children about it because they won't know because they'll have been born in slavery in the wilderness, then tell them about it; you are the primary sources of your history; talk to your children and teach them to obey the laws.

Now, the laws of God were a good thing for the Israelites. We sometimes think that the law was bad, but it was actually a good thing because they were essentially slaves. They were used to being told how to live, what to do, what they couldn't do, and what they could do with their lives. They had a slave mentality. The laws which Moses gave to them was to re-educate them to live as free men and women under the grace of God. But not only that, they were given these laws to help them to live a life that would be so supremely different and countercultural to the peoples around them that it would show the wisdom of God. In Deuteronomy it says, *for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!'*

So they were being told to live God's way, a way of being compassionate to the vulnerable, a way which pursued justice in the face of oppression, a way which would value rest and enjoyment of God's world, not always driven by the profit makers or consumerism. It was all to show the goodness of God so that the world would ultimately be blessed through the nation of

Israel and the completion of the promise that God gave to Abraham, that all the nations would be blessed through him. So the law of God was given for a particular purpose.

Now, let's fast forward to Mark's account, and Jesus and his disciples not washing their hands before eating. Being challenged, Jesus took the opportunity to teach something to the people around him. The teaching point is that there is a danger in forgetting the spirit of the law because we get so concerned with practicalities like washing hands, a bit like the lack of welcome I experienced. But it's always there - that danger when we elevate our procedure of religious practices over the purpose? But what is the purpose of all of this? It is to love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, to love your neighbour as yourself, and to worship the Lord our God.

Now, Jesus talks about the heart three times in these readings, and with each reference, we see the importance of the human heart for religious faith and practice. Nowadays, we see the heart as a muscle, but in those days, the heart was the centre of a person, the centre of their will and their decision making abilities. To turn one's heart away from God or to have it filled with evil intentions was a grievous sin. There are other passages in the Bible that speak about the hardening of our hearts, and that reveals a lack of compassion to others. When our hearts are hard, that's a very harsh place to be. Nowadays, it's very easy to harden our hearts in a society which polarises people and says, take your stand about the refugees or about different groups of people. Take your stand. Once we do that, then we have the temptation to dehumanise the people that we take our stand against. Then once we dehumanise people, we can treat them and think about them however we want. So in this passage, Christ is urging us to examine our defiled hearts rather than our neighbours' dirty hands.

There's a long list of evil intentions which might be quite sobering to look at. It is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, envy, slander, pride, and folly. I'm sure we could add a lot more, and I'm sure that we can feel condemned just by reading some of those lists. But that isn't the intention Jesus - maybe it's to point us to the fact that we can slip into ways which prevent us from being aware of God and from showing compassion to others. Perhaps, just perhaps, we need to be more aware of what's going on inside of us, rather than how we might appear to others. I seem to think that maybe Jesus is calling us to be radically honest and radically vulnerable, to come before him and to live authentic lives, constantly knowing that we're in need of forgiveness and grace and as we stop pretending to ourselves and others, and we allow God to examine our hearts, maybe that is where we can change.

His words remind us that the growth in our capacity to love is directly related to an increased awareness of the hidden intentions of our hearts. Just as a parent loves their child enough to tell them when they're out of order, what might the Lord, our heavenly Father, be reminding us to think about in this word today? Maybe he's asking us to remember what he has done for us, to remember. Maybe he's asking us to be aware that our hearts easily harden - think about our attitudes towards others. Maybe he's asking us to be honest about the darkness in our own lives, in our behaviours, and in our secret thoughts. Maybe he's asking us to come to him and seek forgiveness because his greatest desire for his children is that we are set free and not slaves to anything anymore - free to live as children of God; free to live in ways which show his wisdom and love to others - so that others might be drawn into the family of God.

Because that is why we are here today - the church exists primarily for those who are outside its doors. I'll leave you with a quote attributed to St Augustine:

"The church is a sleeping giant, and if it ever wakes up, it will shake the world".

Perhaps being aware and authentic and honest is part of our waking up today.

Reading Texts

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

¹ So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. ² You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you. ⁶ You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!' ⁷ For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? ⁸ And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today? ⁹ But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children.

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

¹ 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; ⁷ in 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.'