

Healing Hearts

Mark 7:1-23

I wonder if you view this scripture differently after the past 20 months of hands, face, space? Maybe the Pharisees were onto something with their insistence on hand washing?

It didn't impress Jesus though and to put it mildly he goes off on one focussing on the hypocrisy of the Pharisees lifestyles.

To put this in context, the Jewish law in the book of Leviticus said that the priest should wash both hands and feet before ministering at the altar and this was assumed to include washing hands before eating the holy meat from the sacrifice.

The Rabbis took seriously God's word from Exodus 19:6 - you (the whole Israelite nation) you, shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. They argued that this meant all Israelites should be as holy as the priests and that consequently all Jews should wash their hands before eating.

There was strong emphasis placed on the rituals surrounding worship but what made the rituals and the worship completely hypocritical was at the same time as publicly fulfilling all the rituals and requirements, the Pharisees had also created convenient ways to avoid the commandments. Jesus challenges them about their tradition of avoiding the care of parents by saying their monies were devoted to God and adds "and you do many things like that".

What so exercised Jesus was that the kingdom of God was a closed shop to all but a few self-righteous insiders. Remember Jesus central message; the kingdom of God is here, it's for you. The very institution that should have embodied the grace of God, his forgiveness and invitation did the opposite.

That is the risk with every institution. The thinking, the theology, the purpose behind the rituals becomes less important than the ritual itself. Instead of facilitating true heart-felt genuine worship and an encounter with the living God, the rituals and the form of worship becomes the focus.

Institutions by their very nature can inhibit the very thing they try to accomplish. Take for example the Church of England. Revd Terry and I promise to only use the proscribed forms of worship. Why is that?

Our services are public and open to everyone and should someone visit for the first time they should be able to expect worship that is authentic – that is, the words and symbols and rituals the church believes are authentically correct in offering worship. Well. Alright then. Our liturgy today will not mislead anyone.

But it means that I can't use a really creative and fabulous liturgy for communion from the Iona Community. It's wonderfully evocative, but it's not allowed for a public service.

And it might seem a tremendous idea to us that in response to a pandemic we take the wine of communion in individual cups. But it's not authorised.

The boundaries that keep worship authentic, also restrict our creativity.

Jesus fiery response to the guardians of the institution are not something we can be smug about (*thank goodness he's not having a go at us!*). Hypocrisy is a common human trait; we are all tempted to show the world the best version of ourselves that we can manage.

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Hypocrisy is the disconnect between the moral values and standards we espouse and those we actually practice in our behaviour.

(on Screen)

*From the Greek – hypokrisis – acting out a theatrical role
hypokrinesthai – pretending...*

Hypocrisy is the negation of authentic life. It's a life lived out trying to fool others.

The theologian Paul Tillich describes self-integration as one of the three basic functions of life.

Self-integration.

Self-creativity.

Self-transformation.

Self integration is finding the centre of oneself, the core of our being, our true-self. It can be strengthened, it can be enriched it can be deepened...but hypocrisy brings dis-integration rather than self-integration. It's a destructive force.

It can be tempting to shy away from the idea we might in any way be hypocritical and that the charge of hypocrisy was made to the Pharisees and not Jesus disciples, yet the Apostle Paul makes clear this a battle all of us face – I'm quoting verses from Romans chapter 7.

¹⁵ I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.

¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.

²¹ So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me.

²⁴ What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?

²⁵ Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

The on-going work of salvation is the deep work of the Holy Spirit bringing wholeness to our centre; our hearts that have been broken, sinful, wounded, disintegrated, compromised. With St. Paul we can breathe a hopeful sigh "thanks be to God who delivers (or perhaps more accurately) is delivering me through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Katherine and Revd Terry and Jane and I have been studying the Enneagram of personality types which Eilis Bergen and Eddie Fitzgerald describe as

A sophisticated and practical tool for helping people discover their inner selves.

They write

The Enneagram is only a tool, of itself it has no power to save. For us, as Christians, Christ is the one who saves. But one of the great strengths of the Enneagram is that it allows us to see clearly the hidden source of our individual brokenness, the shadow side of our personality, compulsions, addictions, dysfunctional patterns of behaviour and above all, our sin.

If, like St. Paul, we are aware of and admit to that inner disintegration, our own hypocrisy at working so hard to show the world the best version of ourselves, if we can take that step, then

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the rescue we experience in and through Jesus Christ is all the more complete.

To return to today's scripture, the poor old disciples were a bit lost. So familiar with the rituals expected of them they didn't now know what was clean, unclean, acceptable, forbidden.

Jesus makes it clear for them. What goes in and out of the body is irrelevant – it's what is coming from within, the heart, that defiles and negates holiness. Evil thoughts prompting evil actions and Jesus reels off a list.

(on Screen)

out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²² adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. ²³ All these evils come from inside and defile a person."

However we are far from lost and far from helpless, thanks be to God.

Through Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

Through Jesus Christ we are restored in our status before God and the work of restoration from brokenness begins.

In Christ we find meaning and purpose, love and acceptance and fellowship with each other and no Hymn is better as expressing the salvation story and our place In Christ than the Hymn "In Christ Alone" which we'll sing later.

Now though I would like to play another song by the Irish singer Robin Mark. You can only write songs like this when, like St. Paul and so many others you have come to realise the deep inner need for healing and restoration.

My encouragement today is to be open to acknowledge the need for healing on the journey to wholeness, completeness in and through Jesus Christ

By Robin Mark on the album "Room for Grace"

I hear You're in the business of healing hearts
That's why I've come
But I don't even know where I should start
I've seen so many places, cried a million tears
But nothing ever met my need
And no-one ever calmed my fear

And only You can reach me there

Only You can heal

My prayer is that by Your Spirit

You might reveal

The part of my heart that you need to heal

The part of my heart that you need to heal

Well the heart is deceitful above all, Sir

So said your servant

Has he ever said a truer word

I've found so many secrets locked inside of me

And only You can make them known

For only You possess the key

Rev. Jon Hutchinson, 29 August 2021

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