

Trinity XIV (Year B: Proper 17/22 OT) **2018**

How are you with rules and regulations? Are you rigid in your approach to life's journey undertaken in everyday life? If you drive, have you ever broken the speed limit? How are you in regard to lewdness? A naughty joke? Envy? Folly? Surely not? And arrogance is not your thing is it? And yet.....if only they would let you run the country, surely things would be better!

I won't go on, because you, no doubt, will get my drift. It's that list of things which Jesus enumerates in today's Gospel reading. From within, out of human hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a person unclean. And before that, we were hearing about pots and pans, something which for us in Western Society in this 21st century will feel that we have little in common with. In fact, having returned to Mark after our foray into John, today's Gospel reading marks an important moment in Mark's account. It is a midpoint in a larger section in which, having been rejected by his own people in Nazareth, Jesus embarks on a ministry to Jews and then to Gentiles as he travels around Tyre, Sidon and the Decapolis – those cities and areas more heavily influenced by Greco-Roman culture than Judaism in 1st century Palestine. This is revolutionary- the proclaiming of the Kingdom of God to the whole of humanity- and we shall be hearing how this unfolds next week with the account of the Syrophenician woman's encounter with Jesus, when even he is challenged to break out of his own cultural construct.

So, what of pots and pans? Well of course, it is not about pots and pans, per se, but defilement – in religious terms, that all important cleansing for ritual purity. In fact, the relevance of Biblical tradition and custom passed down within Judaism varied from group to group – much as it does nowadays. I'm quite sure that the Jewish community of Stanford Hill will be 'observant' in a quite different way to a Liberal Jewish community in, say, Florida! We know, too, that the early days of our faith saw hot debates about the Biblical Law and the way it related to everyday life with varied views held by different groups of Christians. Paul wrestled with how to combine his faith in Christ with his Jewish roots and we can see this in the evolving of his ideas in the Epistles. The understanding of Biblical interpretation continues to be the great divide within Christianity as it is in most Faith traditions, and indeed the secularist agenda – the irony being that in itself it too is 'religious' or 'zealous' in its approach – but equally divided.

I, for one, value tradition, but what Jesus is pointing out (and in fact we are hearing a slightly filleted account today) is that when tradition becomes bogged down to the exclusion of all else - sometimes with the strictness of a legal enforcement- then there is little benefit in that custom. In fact, the original sign of goodness, whatever that may be, can be overtaken by ridicule or even harm to the group or organisation involved.

I remember hearing the story of a Czechoslovakian synagogue where every Shabbat, the people in the Torah procession with the scroll used to bend the knee slightly when they reached a certain point in the building. A new congregant was puzzled at this ritual, enquired and found out that there had originally been a low-hanging chandelier in that spot

which they didn't want the scroll to end up tangled in! Although the chandelier had long gone, the bowing remained.

One of my great heroes (although I think that he may possibly be even more liberal than I am) Hans Kung (who one responded with a kindly note to me after I had written to him quoting a Cranmer collect!) gave the instance that when he was first ordained the Tridentine Mass was still in use, during which the priest was required to make 25 signs of the cross over the bread and the wine. The Eucharist had become overladen with tradition and wasn't even seen as valid if some of these gestures and movements were left out even by accident. Whilst it might have had some strange fascination because of those liturgical gestures, they had overtaken the actual form of the Eucharist – the joyful and life-giving gathering around the table of the Lord.

Jesus made clear that he was not throwing the symbolic meanings and special significances out – he was after all a Son of the Law himself – Torah was central to his life. What is clear from this passage is that he is articulating that traditions, which can persist and evolve over thousands of years— you can even see this from the gestures made during the Eucharistic Prayer- all form part of the Faith narrative. However, Faith is not merely a matter of convention or gesture. It is an outward flowing of goodness from within, which then expresses itself in our relationship with the world. Tradition, gestures and signs are reminders of the interiority of grace.

In other words, whilst Jesus might seem to rail against human inward emotions, the revolutionary essence of his teaching is that God works within the world through us – he is not sat on a cloud pulling strings like a giant puppeteer. It is **our** response to his call which makes the **outward** flow of grace possible.

Jesus reveals to that through **inward** faith, God helps to transform the world, healing its wounds and forgiving and overcoming our own failures. In knowing his love, knowing that Jesus calls and commissions us to be agents of the Holy Spirit, we then are able to transcend and transform the world, each in our own ways. It doesn't mean that we are perfect vessels of this grace. Far from it. The monstrous stories of abuse recently explored by a Grand Jury report within the Roman Catholic dioceses of Pennsylvania, the Jay Commission's report on the Benedictine schools at Downside and Ampleforth, and of our own diocese, should shock us to the core, particularly where blind clericalism has allowed such things to take place. What all this should never take away is the sense that the Body of Christ although made up of flawed people, is a sign of grace within the world, a mystery of God's moving grace and love. It never was and never can be entirely perfect because we are part of it!

Our Gospel reading should shock us with the directness of Jesus' language – that's good. In this passage we are reminded that this outward flow of the Holy Spirit which we are called to is not about some wishy-washy niceness. As Dorothy L Sayers once wrote, 'We do Jesus singularly little honour by watering down his personality till it could not offend a fly.' This is not our calling. Our calling is to transform the world through his love, because we are ourselves continually transformed through that self-same love. Sometimes this involves bravely speaking out to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord (as Isaiah writes) – this is

and will become more and more difficult because it is counter-cultural to much which is happening at present within the west. Yet make no mistake – the world needs Jesus Christ.

We have all seen the unimaginable tragedy of the migrant crisis continuing to unfold, the ongoing situations in so many nations – look at Chemnitz in Germany, look on our own door step at the increasingly bitter, distasteful and divided politics we are experiencing, the mob-mentality of so-called ‘social websites.’

The only response we can have to adults who have given up on parenting, to youngsters who scar themselves because they don’t see a way forward – the only response is the name of Jesus. This response we can make in certainty, because it was Jesus who said, ‘Come unto me, all that travail and are heavy laden and I will refresh you.’ In other words, following Jesus Christ leads humanity to **true** liberty.



The Cleansing of the Temple - Valentin de Boulogne 1591-1632

Deuteronomy 4: 1-2, 6-9

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. 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. 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!’ For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our

God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?

James 1: 17-end

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfilment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing. If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

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, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 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.) 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?' 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;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines."

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.'

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.' For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.'