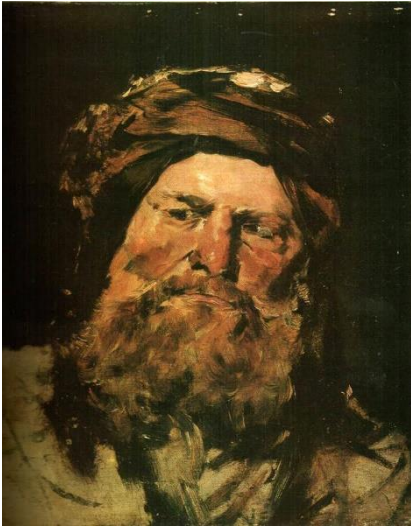


High St Uniting Church Frankston

Look within

Mark 7:1 – 8, 14 – 15, 21 – 23



It is too easy to treat the Pharisees and the scribes as the bad guys in the Gospel stories; the men in black hats to use the old Western movie symbolism. Step back and try to see the struggle that the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem faced in maintaining faith in God in the face of hundreds of years of foreign occupation and inculturation. Following the Law was not just about being faithful to God, it was about maintaining identity as the unique people of God. Recognising that is the reason that the reading today is an abbreviation of the text; to eliminate the criticism of the Pharisees. The issue that is being addressed by Jesus is not that the Pharisees are bad guys, and the laws are bad; it is the fallacy of obeying a set of Laws as the way to be acceptable to God while ignoring the faults and prejudices and anger and selfishness that lies deep within us.

A study Bible will give you notes for this reading to refer you to the section in Leviticus with the laws about cleanliness. Reading those laws shows how practical and reasonable they are. They are not the way to be holy and acceptable to God, but they are the way to protect yourself and your community from infection, from disease, and from harm. From our point of view, 3 thousand years later and in the light of a pandemic, these laws are right up there amongst the best advice. Wash your hands after touching a person who might be infected, after returning from the market, or before a meal. And a lot of other sections of Leviticus contain similar practical advice. Lots of jokes are made about Jewish food laws, particularly the rejection of meat from pigs, but there is plenty of modern health advice about the bad effects of eating over-processed pork meat products. And the many laws about interpersonal relationships, would, if followed, avoid a lot of emotional and spiritual damage in families and communities. There are, in the books of the Law, plenty of wonderful, practical tips for better living, the problem is that they got converted into Laws of purity and the way to please God. And obedience to the Law came at the expense of real contrition and faith. Reading Leviticus as God-given Law that must be followed, without even the calls to love in Deuteronomy, meant that there were no words of mercy and love, it was all demands and judgement and religious ritual.

Jesus words to look within, “Nothing that comes from outside will defile a person, it is what comes out from inside that defile”, are Mark’s stark warning to the Christian community to not focus on external matters at the expense of the heart. Because, while this criticism of the Law was about what defiles, the reverse is also true; “Nothing that comes from outside justifies a person, it is the heartfelt yielding to God in faith that justifies a person”. Just as much as a warning about what to avoid, this is a warning to not follow the old path of reliance on externals – ritual, feasts, rules, or signs. A warning echoed by Paul in Romans and Corinthians. A warning to not treat the rituals and feasts, that are an expression of faith, as some sort of ‘magic’ that connects us to God.

Does it matter how much water is used in baptism, or whether it is still or flowing? Isn’t it the heart felt desire of the person to connect to God that is the important part of the sacrament? Does it matter if we use grape juice instead of wine for communion? Isn’t the gathering more

important than the symbols? A fortnight ago, was the Solemn Feast Day of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary; are we less Christians because we didn't celebrate? Isn't the combined praise of the community in worship for all the gifts of grace and faithful servants, more important?

During anti-vaccine protests in the pandemic, signs like, "The blood of Christ is my vaccine" were seen, and signs with a similar sentiment are available for people to put on their houses to say that they don't need security systems or insurance. Somehow the symbol of blood in the wine of communion has become confused with the blood on the doorposts in the Exodus story that caused the Angel of Death to bypass that house. The symbol, and ritual, has somehow morphed into magic and come to dominate the heartfelt connection to Christ.

The Pharisees, overall, were honest men, seeking to hold the people to faith God through dutifully following the God given Law. What they failed to see is that the details in the Law, the externals of rules and rituals, are not what God wants. And this teaching of Jesus, about what is inside being more important than rituals and feasts, is in the gospels because we can fail to see the same thing, and we need to be reminded that connection to God is about faith and not religious ritual. God is a Spirit and calls us to worship in Spirit and in truth. The prophets of old called the people again and again to grasp this simple truth, and sometimes they used extreme language to get the point across; "I hate your festivals, I despise your solemn assemblies; but let justice flow down like waters and righteousness like an everlasting stream."

My late wife often used the expression, "Deep down inside where I matter", and that's what Jesus was talking about. Inside, deep down, where I really matter; deeper than culture and ritual, deeper than the masks we put on to be acceptable, deeper than trained responses, that is the place of faith. Not on the surface, where you are looking, but deep down where only God sees; that is the place of faith. That is what Jesus is calling us to understand and acknowledge. Because deep down inside, where I really matter, is also the place of prejudice, judgement, desire, fear, hurt and envy; the place that must be opened to God for real connection to happen. Some people don't like the word 'repent', mostly because of the old 'hell fire and brimstone preachers', but the concept is important because connection to God is not about external signs or religious rituals, or correct theology, it's about looking deep within and saying, "I need you, Lord."

The old categories of cleanliness and defilement don't seem relevant or important to us now, in the light of grace and the freedom of the Spirit, but what remains is the lesson of inside and outside. Outside can too easily become about piety and respectability and 'virtue signalling', whereas inside is our true connection to God and the place where the Spirit can do the work of changing us, helping us grow past our emotions and weaknesses, and building us to be more like Christ. Look inward for faith and allow the outward, particularly our lived faith in compassion and care, to be a reflection of our connection to God.