

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Purity

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Amos 5:21-24

Mark 7:1-23

Since the time of the Reformation, one of the most important things that has happened to shape the church, and to shape the way we hear and understand the good news brought by Jesus, is the translation of the Bible into different languages. Before the first stirrings of the Reformation, the Bible was uniformly in Latin, which had ceased to be the everyday language of anyone, and so the matters of faith were less easy to relate to everyday life. Since then, the Bible has been translated into all major and many, many minor languages. I played my humble part in typing out the gospels in the Hupla language of one tribe in Irian Jaya, Indonesian New Guinea; a language spoken by fewer than 5000 people. I was present when they first heard any of the Bible read to them in their own language and I saw the impact it made. When people get the Bible in their own mother-tongue, their faith is better able to develop in ways which are native to them, and which do not feel like an outside imposition. And so, as the centre of Christendom has moved from the North to the South of the world, as more and more people hear and read the Bible in their native tongues, we can expect to see some very different ways of working out the Christian faith coming to the fore.

It all began with the first gospel writers. When Mark sat down to write his gospel, he was not just doing it to fill an idle hour. He didn't wake up one morning with nothing better to do, so he thought: "I know, I'll write a gospel!" He wanted to tell people the good news that Jesus came to bring, and he wanted to tell it in a way that was relevant for the people he had most to do with. Mark, it seems, was closely involved with a group of Christians who were not from a Jewish background. He wanted to be sure that they heard the good news in ways that they could understand and relate to.

One of the reasons we know that Mark wrote for Gentiles - people like us - is found in the passage we read today, where Mark has to explain to his readers what the Jews did and thought regarding ritual washing and notions of purity. It is important to us, who live 2000 years later, to remember that in Jesus' day and Mark's day, ideas of washing and hygiene were not strongly linked. The Pharisees were not concerned about any outward dirt on the disciples' hands contaminating the food and making them unwell. They were concerned that the disciples might become ritually unclean, unfit to appear before God, to pray, to mix with others. The washing referred to was not like doctors scrubbing up, but a ritual gesture to purify the heart as much as the body.

Mark had to tell his readers about this: otherwise they might not have known - as indeed we might not have known that this was happening in Jesus' day: it was not formally codified by the Jews until almost 200 years later. Mark, you see, was writing for people in the latter part of the first century when there was discussion between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians about just how Jewish you had to be, to be a Christian. Mark wanted his readers to be sure that Jesus had distinguished between human tradition and what God really wanted, and particularly he wanted them to know that what Jesus taught was tantamount to declaring the end of the Jewish dietary laws. For Mark, the most important part of this section of his gospel was probably the last bit of verse 19 "Thus he declared all food clean."

We are in no doubt that we can eat any food and it will not do us spiritual harm (we're not talking of health benefits here: you know what the nutritionists say about the relative amounts of fat, sugar, protein and leafy green vegetables we should consume). We don't think that what we eat makes us less fit to come before God. So maybe we don't need to read or think about this passage. Except that this is a passage with layers of meaning. For Mark it meant one thing, but for Jesus, there seems to have been something deeper going on; something more universally important.

What we have here are a collection of saying that Jesus uttered regarding the law and purity. We know that because in these verses we find the words "He said to them" or "Then he said to them" coming up four times. Although Mark has made one incident of this, in order to make his point, it is probably a composite picture of different discussions. The main focus for Jesus is not food, although he mentions it in passing, but purity.

The first thing he wants to challenge is the hypocrisy of using religious, holy language or ideas to actually avoid doing God's will. Lately we have seen personal tax-avoidance in the news yet again, with the disclosure that the comic Jimmy Carr was using a scheme to get out of paying tax on his large earnings. What he did was not illegal, it was clever accountancy, but it was morally repugnant because those who earn less cannot afford to hire such clever accountants to save themselves from paying tax. It was morally repugnant too because we believe that it is only fair that those who have more should pay more towards the running of this country. That sort of legal but immoral tax-avoidance is what many large companies do as well, and is a practice which Christian organisations, such as Christian Aid, are trying to highlight, and to have loopholes in the law tightened up.

The hypocrisy Jesus spoke against was something similar. The Law of God was clear that one should honour father and mother, and honouring in that culture included providing for them in old age, when they could no longer provide for themselves. But some people were getting around God's law by using holy language and declaring that the money they would have used to help their parents had been pledged to God - to the temple upkeep perhaps, or just in general terms set aside in case God needed it. It was arrant hypocrisy, because it went against both love for parents, and love for God: it made serving God an exercise in accountancy and in seeing what you could get away with not doing, rather than an opportunity for love and service and doing as much as you can.

Jesus thought that such impurity of action was far worse than any neglect of ritual washing could be. He still does. He still thinks that our worship is no use to God if we use it as an excuse not to show love to another, or if we come to worship him, or to pray to him with wrong thoughts and motives hiding behind our religious faces. The words of Amos should be words that each Christian takes seriously to heart. God declares that the worship of his people is hateful to him because they do not act rightly before him in their everyday lives. Watch out for the holy language if you are not living a holy life to match.

The justice Amos calls for is twofold. It is both the justice of God in bringing his people to book for not worshipping him properly, with generosity and joy, and the justice that God looks for among his people with righteousness - which is rightness, not self-righteousness - flowing from them to others

But if the purity which Jesus condemned was outward purity, an observance of ritual which allowed a person not avoid looking at the state of his or her heart, what did he commend? What was his agenda? He wanted to show the the laws about purity, Torah or otherwise, did not go near the heart of the matter. Purity is important but it is not achieved by externals. What we do does not make us pure in God's eyes.

It is, however, still seen in externals, actions still show it, but actions of a different kind. Not in washing and ritual, but in the way that we live our lives . He said that we would know the state of

our own hearts by the actions which we perform. Evil comes from within, he said, and he lists it - fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. It's a fairly standard list. If these sins are seen in us, then it is evidence that no matter what ritual we perform, or what pious talk we speak, we are not pure within.

The list Jesus gives may begin the way that the tabloids would list impurity, with fornication, theft, murder and adultery, but it contains other things which our society would wink at, would say are harmless. Our media would like us to be prurient, to be licentious, and to rank sexual sin as the worst of all. When the church gets hung up on sexual matters it is dancing to the media's prurient tune. There are other things which are just as bad, but which will not make the headlines.

Avarice, or greed, for example. Or envy. Not newsworthy, yet these things are very corrosive to a person's spirit, to what sort of person they are. These are things which make for discontent and take our eyes away from what is really important: following Jesus. And what about the last item on the list: folly. How can it be impure to be foolish? And yet, if you think about it, what is foolishness but lack of thought. A foolish person is one who does not consider their own life, where it is going, or consider the best way to use time, or consider the effect of their words or actions on others, or take thought for the future in any way. And Jesus does not call us to live an unconsidered life. He calls us to look to him and follow him and therefore to be aware of how we live.

Jesus came to proclaim and to bring in the kingdom of God, and the kingdom is going to help with purity, real purity. Jesus is going to take our impurity on himself when he goes to the cross, and that is going to make it possible for even fallible creatures like us to be pure before God.

A couple of weeks ago we talked about holiness. Holiness and purity are closely linked. Neither can be achieved by accident, and neither can be achieved by ourselves. We need the Holy Spirit, given to us because of Jesus' death and resurrection, to remake our lives and make us fit to be God's children. We need to bring our lives to God, regularly, daily, and ask him to forgive the wrong and help us live before him in generosity and joy. Then instead of uncleanness coming from our lives to pollute the world, justice will roll from us like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Or as Jesus himself put it:

Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the Scripture has said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water!" (John 7:37-38)

Amen