

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

PURITY

30th August 2015

Mark 7:1-23
James 1:17-27

Where does evil come from? Where does the evil that we see in the world come from? Where does war and murder, genocide and ill-treatment, where does child abuse and the unfairness of economic systems come from? Jesus told us, and his answer is shocking. Evil is not just out there. Evil is not just located in a devil or his demons. Evil comes from the human heart. It lives in the hearts of people who do appalling things; oh, yes, and your heart and mine. In all of this complicated argument with the Pharisees which Mark records for us, this is Jesus' punchline. I thought we should get straight to it, in case the twists and turns of the argument distract us from what Jesus is really trying to say. He is trying to define the problem of the human condition, he wants everyone to know that evil is not an abstract thing, but is always found attached to a person. It comes from the human heart.

There are lots of ways in which we might be distracted, after all. We might be distracted by considering the purity laws of the Jews. Mark tells us a bit about them, because he was writing for people like us, not for people who already knew all about it. His explanations spoil the flow of the incident, but Mark knew that this was a crucially important discussion which he is recording, and he has to make sure we get it. The purity laws were what made the Jews, Jews, in the eyes of the rest of the world. The purity laws were what made them special in their own eyes as well. They weren't like those pagan Gentiles; see, they washed this and that, they refrained from eating this and that: they were different. And when for the past two hundred years your nation has been under the domination, cultural and political, of other powers, you need ways of showing how different, how much better you are. They needed to keep these laws to show that they were pure.

But if we think Jesus was primarily concerned about washing or not washing, about eating or not eating, about the externals, then we would miss the point. He wasn't just saying "If you follow me, you can forget all of that." By forgetting all of that, as he did, he was saying something more.

We might be distracted by considering how tradition twisted Scripture so that it became an accepted thing to honour the God who said "honour your Father and your Mother" by doing nothing for your parents. But then we might be led aside into thinking that the discussion between Jesus and the Pharisees and lawyers was about the relative authorities of Scripture and Tradition in the same way that for several hundred years, and especially since the Reformation, the church has discussed these things between denominations. This is not Jesus siding with the Protestants, who tend to stress Scripture more, against the Catholics who have historically built up a reliance on a Scripture-based tradition. If Jesus is saying anything about Scripture here – and he is, although it is not his main point – he is warning against making a tradition of only one way of looking at Scripture.

For two hundred years the Pharisees and their forebears had made a tradition of interpreting Scripture and highlighting Scripture in ways which showed the sanctity and exclusivity of their nation. It is very, very easy to look at Scripture and see only what you want to see or expect to see. It is just as easy for Christians as it was for the Pharisees. In recent years the Church of Scotland has had a long debate about people who feel more at home in same-sex relationships and what the Bible has to say about it. And people from both sides have used the Bible, used Scripture to back up their views. The debate goes on. Some say it is a debate about the authority of Scripture, but I think it is more a debate about how we look at Scripture and, very often, about what we expect to find there. We should not make an idolatry out of our interpretation of Scripture. I would be more likely to listen to someone who had studied Scripture and because of that changed their mind about an issue, than to someone who had looked at Scripture and found there corroboration of what they already thought. But that isn't Jesus' main point either.

We might be distracted, as the disciples nearly were, by toilet humour "Whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters not the heart, but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer." (verse 19). Or we might think that, like many Greek teachers of his time, Jesus was making a dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual, with physical as bad or unimportant, and what is really necessary is to be yourself, to know yourself, to be true to yourself. That has been a mainstay of Western thought ever since the Greeks. It was very influential around the time of the reformation, and around the time when Shakespeare was writing, and such has been his influence that it has come down to us. "Be true to yourself" that is what matters, we are told. Look inside yourself and you will find the truth.

But Jesus is saying the exact opposite of this. He says that if you look inside yourself you will find the seat of all the evil that you do and that you might do. 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. The real lack of purity in a person is found, not in eating with dirty hands – though that might give you a tummy ache – but in the heart of each person. And this is a very Scriptural view of the human condition, because in fact it begins in the Garden of Eden.

Jesus and the Pharisees use Scripture in different ways. The Pharisees read it with an exclusive filter – they wanted to find how they were different, better, more chosen than others, and to make that clear to everyone. Jesus read Scripture as pointing, not to a human race or kingdom, but to the kingdom of God. We stopped reading at the end of his statement about the human heart – after all, you have to stop somewhere – but next week we will be looking at the story of the healing of the Syrophenician's daughter, which is the very next incident that Mark records, and that surely tells us something about the inclusivity of God's Kingdom.

Jesus was able to forget all of the purity laws, because the Kingdom of God which was breaking in in his ministry was not about exclusivity but inclusivity. But the human tragedy is about impurity, not of the body but of the heart. Jesus points out the root of evil, the focus of the tragedy of the human condition, and he does so because by opening God's kingdom to us, through his death and resurrection, he is going to offer an answer, the answer to the problem.

James teaches us this. We read this morning that "in fulfilment of his own purpose [God] gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruit of his creatures." (verse 18). James is not one to use more words than he needs to. He is not a theologian's theologian, but a practical man, but his practicality is rooted in a profound

understanding of our salvation through Jesus. We are given birth, new birth – echoes of John's gospel here – through the word of truth – more echoes of John – you would almost think James and John knew each other (which they did, though this James was not John's brother, but Jesus)! The word of truth which God gives us is Jesus himself, and through him we are given new birth, made anew, made with new hearts. And so Jesus is the solution to the problem of evil in the human heart. He re-births us, pure and new.

And so there is a chance for us to be different. One of the reasons I love the letter of James is that he is a practical man. Having told us what the solution is – Jesus – he then tells us how our purified lives should be, what they should look like, what we should do.

He says that we should not just listen, but also act. Listening is important. We have to listen to God, listen to Scripture, listen to God in each other and God in the world around us. But sometimes we can get stuck at the listening stage. I have known churches who spend hours and hours in prayer and listening, but never then seem to have time or energy or vision to actually do anything. It is so easy for us to be distracted by things that are true and important but are not the nub of the matter. We are to listen and then we are to act.

That is great, and maybe we then see ourselves as acting to go out and save the world, preaching to all and sundry, urging them into the kingdom. But that is not how James sees it. So, he tells us that we are to act by getting rid of our anger – easier said than done – and by bridling our tongues. Only then, when we have acted by taking heed to ourselves and our shortcomings should we reach out to others with practical love. James names those who were most helpless in his society, the widows and the orphans. We might say the homeless and the refugees as well.

Out of the human heart all kinds of evil can come, that is our fallen state, our state without Jesus, without God's salvation. Not everyone displays every evil tendency that is possible, but the tendency to evil which is rooted in grasping and selfishness is found inside us. But there is a solution to this problem, and this is why as we listen to God, and as we take action on our own anger and speaking, on our showing love for the vulnerable we should also pray for those who do the worst kind of evil. God does not hate them, though he hates their evil deeds, just as he hates yours or mine. And the answer, the ultimate answer to all the wickedness in the world is to bring in God's kingdom with acts of love and self-giving, so that all may know the new birth that Jesus, the word of truth, can bring.

God grant that we be those who look into the mirror of God's living word and then allow him to help us make the changes in our lives that show the pure hearts he has given us. Amen.