



The Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity
6 September 2015

Coming Clean

A sermon by Revd Dr Sam Wells

Readings: Isaiah 35.4-7a; James 2.1-10, 14-17; Mark 7.24-end

I want to think with you about what are the driving forces in our lives today, what makes society and the economy tick, what is so universally taken for granted that we seldom if ever stop to reflect on it, what goes so deep that it would be disturbing to question it. The conventional answer to this question is money, sex and power. But I believe these forces are still too near the surface. I'm talking about deeper things than these. I'm going to suggest three quests that pervade our culture such that we don't notice them. In a world where we're expected to create our own meaning, and where that task is beyond most of us most of the time – and in an era when we seldom talk publicly about judgement and the life everlasting – these are the things we seek instead.

The first is a quest for achievement – a longing to leave a mark on the world that the ravages of time and the enemy of death won't take away. This is a quest for perfection – for the fastest speed, the greatest film, the largest company. It's about stretching human capacity to its limit, and hoping thereby to exceed that limit and get a glimpse of something beyond life.

The second is a quest for a quality of experience, a depth of discovery, of feeling, emotion, texture, touch, truth, that takes the two-dimensional quest for achievement into a third dimension of profound consciousness. This says, 'Ok, I'm not going to live forever, but I'm really going to live – and whether in exotic adventures, on the dance floor, the ski slope, the Amazon jungle, the mind-enhancing drug or the passionate romance, I'm going as deep into the depth of discovery as a human being can go.'

The third is a quest for security. This is a restless search for a wall of defence that can offer reliable protection from all that's threatening and frightening and damaging. It can be a sophisticated system of hidden cameras or an idyll of stable family life; it can be a large investment portfolio or an oversized cv of qualifications. It can be a staff of bodyguards or an extensive healthcare plan. All of these are ways of saying, 'nothing can go wrong now.'

What these three quests, for achievement, experience and security, have in common is that they're ultimately unattainable and perpetually vulnerable. What keeps the economy going is that those with disposable income spend so much of it on seeking these goals. The things public attention focuses on, like wealth, celebrity, and attractiveness, are really commodified versions of these quests: being rich or famous is only valuable if it offers increased access to achievement, experience and security.

These quests were largely unknown to all but the ruling élites of ancient cultures. They're fruits of relatively affluent contemporary mass culture. And that partly accounts for why stories from the Bible like the two healings in Mark's gospel we heard just now are hard to comprehend. The reason these two healing stories matter is that they strike right at the heart of what people care about deeply but seldom need or know how to articulate. The difficulty is that the things people deeply care about are culturally dependent and have changed significantly in the intervening 2000 years.

What quests pervaded the culture of the common people of first-century Palestine? Well, if we restrict ourselves again to three, we could start with the quest for survival. Life was so much more

dangerous then than now. Food supply was always precarious and never reliable. Disease was much less treatable and its causes much less well understood. Violent death and foreign invasion were a perpetual danger. Fertility was by no means guaranteed, and being childless meant not just having no heirs but having no retirement or sickness plan.

A second quest was for social coherence. Today we take for granted the infrastructure of civilised society – judicial procedures, police, taxes, the rule of law, welfare, education, hospitals. In the first century none of these existed, certainly not reliably and evenhandedly. Those who couldn't assert their social power – in other words, almost everyone besides wealthy adult males – were constantly exposed to being taken advantage of. Beyond just surviving, life could be deeply oppressive.

And the third quest was for identity. Israel was marked out by a story, the story of its liberation from Egypt, its Promised Land, kings, and great Temple, its exile in and return from Babylon. At the centre of this story was the covenant, made between God and Moses, by which Israel lived a special way of life and in return God provided companionship, survival, and flourishing.

When you look at the actions, teaching and healing of Jesus in the gospels, perhaps not all but certainly most of what's going on is engaging with some combination of these three quests – for Israel and its people's survival, coherence, and identity. In each of these areas Jesus kept running up against taboos. Now taboos are no-go areas. They're not a trivial indication of squeamishness or small-mindedness. They're a guaranteed sign that you're encountering something a society cares about deeply but can't fully articulate. Whenever we look at the gospels we're perceiving one taboo after another – and they more or less all concern survival, coherence, and identity. They're about eating food and who you eat with, about warding off disease, about keeping free of foreigners, observing special days, washing, and maintaining boundaries around birth, sex and death. Fundamentally they're about keeping Israel pure – pure to avoid disease, pure to be different, pure to be good.

Take the stories that make up today's gospel. A girl has a demon – unclean. She's a Gentile – unclean. Her mother touches Jesus' feet – unclean. They talk about sharing food – unclean – and dogs – unclean. You can't move for taboos. Then Jesus meets another Gentile – again, unclean – who's got multiple disabilities – unclean. Jesus spits – unclean – and puts his fingers in the man's ears – unclean yet again. There's intimate touch and bodily fluids and foreigners and animals everywhere. Every detail in this story challenges Israel's conventional way of assuring its salvation by being pure before God. You could translate this story better by printing all those exclamation marks and skull-and-cross-bones they use in cartoon speech bubbles to refer to swearing and cursing. It's one transgression after another.

We miss this because we don't recognise the purity code and because we think in our culture we're more advanced and don't have taboos. We find the laws of Leviticus arcane and absurd and it makes the Bible feel alien and backward. But just pause for a moment. Of course we have taboos. Tabloid headlines play on them all the time. We have intricate codes around hygiene, around sex, around food, around children. We're obsessed with threats from foreigners and what on earth is health and safety legislation and political correctness if not a colossal set of purity codes? We all have our codes and taboos. Don't let's kid ourselves.

But here's the crucial point. What Jesus was saying was, Israel can't become clean simply by expelling the stranger, the different, the weak, and the foreigner. When earlier in this chapter of Mark Jesus says, 'There's nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile,' the person he's referring to is Israel as a whole. Israel can't kid itself that its problem is the Roman occupation. Its problem is within its own heart, in alienation from God and one another, in departing from the covenant that's the heart of its story.

And so what does Jesus do? Jesus becomes Israel's new body. Jesus experiences in his own body all the taboos that paralysed Israel. He experiences the taboo of death, the taboo of blood, the taboo and curse of crucifixion, the taboo of being killed outside the gate like a foreigner, of being reckoned with the bandits and robbers. He becomes fundamentally, existentially, utterly unclean.

And in his resurrection he gives us a new code, a code as challenging to our codes and aspirations today as to Israel's quests and laws at the time. In place of the sacrifice he brings us forgiveness that makes enemies into friends and opens a future that's bigger than the past. In place of the sexual codes that order reproduction and guarantee lineage he gives us baptism through which the church grows by conversion rather than by birth. In place of the terror of death and obsession with survival and security he gives us the promise of everlasting life in which we shall be God's companions forever. In place of rituals around infection and uncleanness and dirt and disease he gives us healing in which the painful and the persistent and the paralysing become wisdom and understanding and wholeness. In place of dietary laws and food restrictions and constraints around who can share our table he gives us the Eucharist in which sinner and Gentile and unclean and dirty and shameful and disgraced and ugly and disfigured can gather and share together the bread of life and cup of salvation that flow from the greatest taboo of all – the demeaning death of the Lord of Life.

That code is just as challenging now as it was then. In the face of our quest for achievement it asks us if we're just trying vainly to make a temple that can't be destroyed, and invites us to lay down our lives in baptism that the Holy Spirit may pick them up and use them for God's glory rather than our own. In the face of our quest for experience it asks us if we're defying the laws of physics by trying to orient a world around ourselves, and invites us to gather at the table of truth where all bring their different gifts and resources to the altar and all receive back the same, bread for today and bread of life forever. In the face of our quest for security it asks us if we really think the bad things all come from outside, and invites us through forgiveness to recognise the damage we've done and are doing to others and the future that can only be secured through repentance and reconciliation.

Jesus exposes all our taboos. It's not that all taboos are wrong it's that Jesus engages with the most intimate, inarticulate and unresolved parts of ourselves. That's where he does his work. That's where he meets us. He delves into the fears and devices so deep in our hearts and cultures we only know they're there when he transgresses into them. That's why he was killed. That's why he'd be killed, again, today, if he came into our carefully-cleansed world.

Salvation isn't about keeping the rules and keeping your nose clean. It's about God having a love so passionate it's prepared to go into the place of shame and horror and exclusion in order to come face to face with us. And about our being willing to make the same journey into the dirty, the disgraceful and the disreputable to come face to face with God. Out of love Jesus becomes fundamentally unclean and impure. And out of this sewage-heap of our horror and shame and exclusion he creates the kingdom of God, in which fears can be faced, hurts healed, wrongs righted, death dismantled, and love enthroned. That's what he was doing in the villages and in pathways of Tyre and Sidon. And that's what he's doing today.