

St. Andrew’s Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Mark 7:1-23

“Tradition or Scripture?”

Some Christian songs over the years that point to this – The Battle Belongs to the Lord, by Jessie Owens Collins, Onward Christian Soldiers, going into war but we are not going alone. We have the Word of Jesus and in Ephesians 6 – which we read this morning – Put on the Full Armor of God, and the Sword of the Spirit which is the Holy Word of God. Today’s Holy Gospel reading from Mark is about purity – the exact opposite of evil; but the first answer that Jesus gave to the questioning Pharisees was about people obeying human traditions rather than what was spelled out in God’s Holy Word. Jesus gave a pretty complicated, example – boiling down to tradition versus the Law.

The debate between Jesus and the Pharisees was over two different understandings of what it meant to be a good Jew. The charge that Jesus makes against the Pharisees and the experts of the Law is that teaching things as essential Law when they are really only human “custom” or “tradition” - rather than from God’s Law – is so very, very wrong. These Jewish leaders are claiming to be teachers of God’s truth and law, but in fact what they are really teaching is human traditions. This comes up because of the question about the tradition of purity. *“Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands?”* (Mark 7:5) Could you imagine today- someone standing at the door and asking each one – why aren’t you using hand sanitizer? That is not in God’s Word – but that has become a tradition and so we honor that tradition – as every pew has two bottles of hand sanitizer. We are not following God’s Word, except for caring for our neighbors. We have plenty of masks in the back if you feel that you want to wear a mask – they are there for you as well. Just understand that tradition is a far cry from the Word of God. Jesus uses a very clever way to make His point in response to that question. Like a cunning accountant finding a loophole in the law which enables someone to avoid paying some taxes, these legal experts have found a way for people to get out of any financial obligation to their parents. By declaring their property *“to belong to God,”* they can be free of any or all further obligation to their parents. A loophole. This is absolutely pure hypocrisy! It was God who commanded people, through Moses, to *‘Honor your father and your mother,’* (Mark 7:10) (also in Exodus 20) and here these leaders were officially *‘making it a gift devoted to God’* in other words – a write off - and so were actually making a mockery of the God they are claiming to honor!

The bigger issue for Jesus and the Pharisees was - who speaks for God today? Is it God’s Word, the Holy Bible, or is it the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law? We have seen this same problem in some churches today, in which the leaders seem to think they know better than God’s Word. – Holy Scripture. They say – let’s do it this way – even though God’s Word says no. The Pharisees had built up, over nearly two hundred years, an agenda which was both political and religious. For them - the two went hand in hand. The traditions they had developed meant that Scripture was being interpreted and applied in particular directions, which supported their very own special programs. The way they looked at Biblical purity and

their laws was very similar – it was by THEIR views. The hardline Pharisees were urging people to accept THEIR ways. In other words – “it is my way or the highway!” Jesus, in His valuing ‘Scripture’, against ‘tradition’ was challenging the very basis on which the Pharisees had built up their organizational empire – and their power over the people. There is an old rock song called “Under My Thumb” by the Rolling Stones, thinking of Charlie Watts their drummer who passed away this week, but people in leadership in some ways love to have people under their thumb – making them not even think for themselves, that is not how we Christians do business. Jesus in His valuing Scripture against tradition was challenging the very basic in which the Pharisees had built up their empire.

If God’s kingdom was going to be coming through the work Jesus was doing, and through the person of Jesus – by healing, by eating with tax collectors and sinners, by tackling demons head on – then that way the layers after layers of Pharisaic tradition they had been pointing to – was dead in its tracks from the start. It just could not compare to God’s Holy Word! Jesus’ argument for what He was doing was that it was the fulfilment of Scripture. If you follow Him – you follow Scripture. If you go the Pharisees’ way, then Scripture – which was supposedly the basis for their tradition, but was actually often undermined by it – and you would lose out.

Often when people get angry and start asking questions about why someone’s doing something, it’s because there is a larger agenda at stake. It quite often has political dimensions which don’t appear on the surface. Part of being a Christian is to learn spiritual discernment and the context of the Scripture. You have got to be in it to win it – in other words – we need to open it ask God and learn to understand His Holy Word – Holy Scripture, and test human traditions against it – and see just what it is that God have to say.

Have you ever told a joke and got absolutely no response? If you have to explain it, then that takes all the fun out of it. The joke you told went over like a lead balloon! Well, a parable isn’t a joke and the parable that Jesus told about the parents, was no laughing matter. It was the only way that Jesus could say some of the most devastating things that He wanted to say. If you’re trying to tell the world that it’s going the wrong way, that its heroes fought for the wrong cause and its martyrs died in the wrong ditch, you better be careful how you do it. It has got to be cryptic. The Pharisees needed to be answered. And so the Gospel says, “*again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.' "*” (Mark 7:14-15)

Jesus really expected His disciples to get the point, but apparently it flew right over their heads. Talk of ‘*what goes into you*’ and ‘*what comes out of you*’ would seem to lead some people down a road of lavatory humor, or potty talk. What could Jesus have meant? When they get back to the house, Jesus explains to them, just as He did in Mark 4 with the parable of the sower. Jesus wasn’t talking about physical things that come out of people, but instead He is talking about what comes out of a person’s heart. The heart is our biggest filter. What comes into your head

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost, August 29, 2021, Liturgical Year “B”

has to go through your heart. What your hearts feels and what your heart knows is what really leads you. Jesus suggests that the purity laws point to the real need of humans for a deeper purity, a purity of purpose. Eating meat, called ‘trayf’ – which does not satisfy Jewish Law, animals like crocodile to kangaroo, from pig to porcupine, shrimp or lobster won’t affect that. Those who get stuck on regulations about food, and never get to the real point, are missing the whole heart of the matter. By focusing on outward purity, they are avoiding the much deeper challenge of the Gospel, which is the challenge to the human heart. What matters are the internal, ‘spiritual things’. If your heart is heavy, if your heart is darkened – nothing can come out that is of light. You need to take it to God – and how do we do that? You talk to Him, pray to Him, go to His Holy Word and ask Him to cleanse us.

Jesus is insisting that good and bad external and physical actions come from internal and spiritual sources, and that the poisoned wells of human motivation are the real problem to which the purity laws are pointing. We can’t just isolate one part of our human make-up and blame it for evil. We also can’t suggest that ‘getting in touch with our deepest feelings’ will give you the clear answers. I am sorry – meditation won’t do it! Prayer will.

Let me say plainly - if there is evil, it infects the whole, and it just doesn’t go for one part – but it spreads. That is why yeast was used in the Old Testament as a symbol for sin – which spreads and infects the whole and becomes part of it. That’s what purity and impurity are really all about. Later in Mark 10:5 Jesus talks about hardened hearts that result in wicked thoughts and deeds. The only solution is the Kingdom of God.

The old Jewish laws about clean and unclean foods, laws which divided Jew from Gentile, were irrelevant in God’s eyes. Paul’s letters show us how this issue remained an explosive one within the early church. Jesus’ basic point is that purity laws, including food laws, don’t actually touch the real human problem. What happened in and through Jesus brought the old Scriptures, the whole Old Covenant with Israel, to a new completion, a new fulfilment. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. The Apostle Peter had a vision that “*contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air*” after Jesus had ascended to the Father, reminding him of Jesus’ words from Mark 7, which is recalled in Acts chapter 10 – in which God told him, “*Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.*” (Acts 10:15) Peter heard those words from heaven, with God speaking. The Scriptures spoke of purity and set up codes as signs to it; Jesus was offering the reality. God put signs for us throughout all of Scripture - all pointing to one Person – the purity and perfection of His Son, Jesus Christ. To Him be the Glory.