

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 30, 2015, Year B

**St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

***"Purity"***

What a Gospel! So much going on – and powerful words, especially those that deal with “it’s not what goes into a man’s mouth, but what comes out of his mouth.” It is all about washing hands and things like that – and it most certainly brought to mind this – that I would like to share with you: One of the most incredible signs that I have seen is upon visiting a washroom. Have you ever noticed a sign hung clearly that says “Employees MUST wash their hands!” Don’t you think that should read “Everyone MUST wash their hands?” Then I think about the door handle on the way out – yuck! Wash and then touch that? Oh boy – that is where a strategic piece of toweling comes in handy in order to open the door and get the heck out of there. I am not a germaphobe, but I do like to have my hands free of any of that “gook.” Come to think of it – it is not just in washrooms – but all societies have purity laws of one sort or another; children today are taught, even in school, quite strictly when and how to wash their hands to prevent infection and disease.

In today’s Holy Gospel, the question Jesus was asked was about purity; but the first answer He gave addressed the issue about people obeying human traditions rather than God’s word. The charge Jesus levels against the Pharisees and “experts of the Law” is that they are teaching and confusing things as fundamental law which are in fact only human customs and therefore are guilty of hypocrisy, and really a sort of play-acting. They are claiming to be teachers of God’s truth and law, but in fact they are only really teaching human traditions. The food laws were very clearly spelled out in the Law of Moses – but some of the Law had been added to by tradition. You only have to read Leviticus chapter 11 to see all of the food restrictions that God put upon His people – and they were really for their safety. Sometime this week take a moment to read this chapter. If you don’t have a Bible readily available, then please Google Leviticus 11. You would be amazed at what you should not eat – but what you should not even go near. They had no means of refrigeration or cleaning those animals – and so for their own sake – these animals were forbidden – especially as food. God emphasizes the importance by His words at the end of that chapter: *"I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy. Do not make yourselves unclean by any creature that moves about on the ground." "I am the LORD who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy." "" "These are the regulations concerning animals, birds, every living thing that moves in the water and every creature that moves about on the ground." "You must distinguish between the unclean and the clean, between living creatures that may be eaten and those that may not be eaten." "" (Leviticus 11:44-47) Common sense tells us to wash our hands – for sanitary reasons – and it became tradition, but Jesus is making a distinction between what is tradition and what is God’s Law.*

Let me give you an example from our church. When and why do we ring the bells during the service? Do you know? Is there any place in the Bible telling us when to ring the Sanctus bells, and how many times? No, this is purely tradition, and it varies from parish to parish, or diocese to diocese and province to province. Even the type of bells used is a local tradition. We are

blessed that these bells were given to our church as a gift by Don and Beverly Campbell. When I got here a little under a year ago there was a “void” at a certain part of the service – we had no bell! Everyone seems to need that as an indication, so let me tell where this tradition began. The tradition began around the 13<sup>th</sup> century in order to alert the people that the most holy time of the service was upon them, ringing once just before the words of institution or consecration, and then when the host is elevated and then when the cup is elevated. This was mainly done because the service or mass was not in the native language – it was in Latin – and people did not know what was being said. Here at St. Andrew’s the first bell is rung just before the words of institution, and then three times – when the priest genuflects on kneels, then when the host is lifted high and then again when the priest genuflects. The same three bells are rung with the chalice or cup being lifted high – out of reverence for the Body of Christ. The tradition is meaningful and beautiful – but not mandatory. We do it because we like it and enjoy the sense of holiness it brings – and we know Christ is present.

And then let’s talk about incense: there are those who enjoy seeing the smoke rise like prayers in the way they did for years from the altar of incense in the Tabernacle and then the Temple, in Jerusalem, and on the other hand there are those who do not enjoy it at all! The tradition in the church came from the middle ages when people did not bathe as regularly as we do today. The incense was burned and smoke arose – being wafted high from the thurible, adding a more pleasant aroma than the people themselves. It wasn’t just the poorer people, but the rich didn’t use that much perfume themselves! The church has continued this tradition – more for the prayers rising than the other. We here at St. Andrew’s use incense at special occasions – and I thank God have found a floral incense, which is hypo-allergenic – guaranteeing “no choke smoke!” I look forward to the next time we use incense – and I hope you do too! Gray McKinnon had a video on Facebook that was from a church or cathedral in Spain, and they had a huge thurible and it was filled with incense and charcoal – the smoke was like a 5 alarm fire. Gray said “the more the better!” He is a perfect example of someone who truly values the incense.

I like incense because of the rising prayers and a sense of holiness, but I also don’t like to see people doubling over and choking and saying “I am not coming back to a service that does that again.” We need to find a common ground.

The point I want to make is that we need to distinguish what is tradition and what is Scriptural. You notice that our service is separated into two different parts – The Word of God and Holy Communion. We are currently in the Word of God, and that continues up until what you might call “half time” or the Peace, where we share the love of Jesus Christ with one another, and it is awesome here at St. Andrew’s. We don’t put a clock on it or a stopwatch – we make sure that everyone present gets the message that we love y’all! The Word of God, in which we honor and praise the Words that have been given to us – from both the Old and New Testament, and after the sermon – we pray a traditional prayer – solely based on Scripture – The Nicene Creed, originally developed from the leaders of the Church at the Council of Nicea in the year 325 AD, but was prayerfully amended with Scriptural reference at the first council of Constantinople in

381 AD. We stand and profess our faith together – speaking the Scriptural truth about the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; about the Holy Spirit coming upon the Virgin Mary – and Jesus taking on flesh; about the suffering, death, resurrection and ascension of our Lord Jesus – and the fact that He sits at the right hand of the Father; we affirm the role of the Holy Spirit and the truth of one Holy, catholic (universal), and apostolic church which provides one Baptism, which gives believers eternal life for the resurrection and the new world that Jesus will bring when He comes again. Scriptural or traditional: Scriptural!

After adding our prayers to God on behalf of His people, we come to Him with our sins and ask for forgiveness – so that when we come forward to His table, in the second part of the service called Holy Communion, we may have the assurance of an absolution, that we come to receive His Body and Blood with clean hearts – with the purity that Jesus spoke about. The Body and Blood are transformed at the table of the Lord, (it is beautiful – but it is not the table of St. Andrew’s but it is the table of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ) - the altar. It is not transformed by me, but by the Holy Spirit, who works through me, the priest, transforming the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, making them the REAL PRESENCE – using the word that were given us – spoken by Jesus at the Last Supper. There has long been discussion about the bread and wine with Roman Catholics believing that the bread and wine are transfigured physically and spiritually in the Body and Blood; the Lutherans believe in consubstantiation - spiritually the flesh and blood of Jesus, yet the bread and wine are still actually only bread and wine. As Anglicans we believe that the REAL PRESENCE of Christ becomes a part of the Bread and Wine – physically. I was asked about this when I was interviewed by the Discernment Committee, way back when we entered the process for ordination. Marilyn and I had to meet with these people, chosen by our Rector and by ourselves, to be the judges or whether we would go forward in the process to become a priest. If at the final part of this Discernment Committee, they decided that their answer was no, then it was over; I would not move forward. We put our trust in these people: Scriptural or traditional: a little of both – depending on the answers. One of the questions at these meetings was “what happens with the bread and wine?” My answer was this: something happens that is incredible. The Holy Spirit takes the bread and the wine; if you did a DNA test you would receive results of bread and wine – but if there were such a thing as a spiritual DNA test – I know personally I would be on my face in front of those two elements, saying as Thomas did – “*my Lord and my God!*” The bread and wine are spiritual food – Jesus Himself. That is why we have the tradition of the Ambry, the wall safe with the red candle, signifying that the reserve bread and wine, called the reserve sacrament are kept and the candle indicates that we need to be reverent – for His presence is in the Ambry – He is home. We have an Ambry, and the Roman Catholic churches call it a tabernacle. We keep the reserve Sacrament that I can bring to those sick or homebound. If somewhere down the line that we raise up a person, like Colin was – a Lay Eucharistic Minister, to take Holy Communion to the shut-ins, then that person will be trained and commissioned to bring the reserve Sacrament to those people.

We keep that red candle lit, and it is just saying “be reverent – Christ is present, His presence, the Real Presence is in the Ambry.” It is a reverent tradition that we consume the left over Holy

Communion, or put it in the Ambry. The blessed Holy Water and vessels used at Communion are not just poured down the drain – but we have a special sink in the sacristy, (I will be glad to show it to you) a piscina, with a drain that goes directly to the earth. We are treating the blessed elements with the utmost respect and reverence. Even the water that is blessed at the altar, have you even noticed that as the first server Acolyte brings over the water and the wine, I pour the wine into the chalice or chalices, and then I take the water and bless it. It now becomes Holy Water which I pour into the chalices, then wash my fingers. This water needs to be disposed of in the same way – not just dumped – but poured into the ground, into the piscina. Is this Scriptural? No, but certainly a holy tradition – using the truth from Scripture to lead and guide our behavior.

In making the distinction between tradition and God's Law (His Holy Scripture) Jesus was indeed showing His fulfillment of the Law e said "*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.*" (Matthew 5:17) Jesus was pointing to **the purity of one's heart as more important than what one eats.** Shrimp, lobster, they were all taboo in the Old Testament, even some of the things that you might have at Harper's later on after the service, or at the Country Club – or wherever you might be going. Some of these things were not allowed in the Old Testament, but they are allowed today because of the purity laws. It is more important what is in your heart than what you put into your mouth! The Jewish scriptures aren't to be seen as a timeless code of behavior, but as the story which leads and points to Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This doesn't mean we can casually set aside bits we don't like or understand. When things are set aside, as the purity laws are here, it's not because they're irrelevant but because the deeper truth to which they pointed has now arrived. Standing in front of these teachers of the Law was the fulfillment – Christ Himself, the Messiah! Everything the Old Testament Scriptures were getting at reached a peak in Jesus Christ; from now on everything is different.

The Church uses a mixture, a beautiful mixture of Scripture, tradition, and reason in worshipping and glorifying God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. My brothers and sisters, one of the reasons that we are here today in the Anglican Church of North America is because we believe THAT SCRIPTURE COMES FIRST! We must always put Scripture first and foremost. Scripture needs to be the filter by which we measure all behavior – and tradition. We come here today to as Anglicans to worship the Living God, His Only Son, and His most Holy Spirit – the Triune God – who we call the Trinity - using **Scripture as our God given guide for living. His Holy Spirit inspired the writing of His Word – and mankind has no right or place to modify it – because of cultural changes.** The Truth is unchangeable – for Jesus said on the night before He died: "*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*" (John 14:6) He is NOT one of many ways – He is THE WAY -and the author of the letter to the Hebrews makes it so clear saying "*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.*" (Hebrews 13:8) He has no expiration date, neither does His Holy Word. I pray, may these words touch your hearts and lead you to living a holy life – striving for purity of heart.