

Sunday between 28<sup>th</sup> August and 3<sup>rd</sup> September [22]

Mark 7:1-8, 14-23

Our readings today point us to the laws of God. The Letter of James tells us we are to be doers of the message of God and not hearers only. There is no point knowing what God wants from us if we then refuse to act on that knowledge. There is no doubt, that God, since the earliest prophets, is trying to get a message to humanity about the way we live, what we do and say, how we think and behave.

What is less clear is what those commandments look like. None of the portions of scripture we heard this morning clarifies this issue but there are lots and lots and lots of laws and commandments in the bible. In Leviticus alone there are 613 individual rules and regulations each with a judgement alongside it. There are the 10 commandments of course, the place it all began with Moses asking God to firm up the requirements of the covenant with Israel which the people managed to annihilate before Moses even made it back down the mountain! Then there is Jesus' message of love and forgiveness which saw him regularly and deliberately break established Mosaic laws publicly while telling his followers that he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it. It's no wonder, really, that we are confused about biblical law.

In the Gospel reading today Jesus does one of those deliberately provoking acts of eating without ritual purification by the washing of hands. Now washing your hands before eating is a common practice among many people, one could argue that it's just good hygiene and well-mannered particularly if sharing dishes with others. But for the Jewish people it had become more than a practical matter, it was enshrined in tradition, it had become a law, the washing of hands before eating was necessary to be in good standing before God. You had to wash your hands to keep up your end of the covenant bargain, it's part of the rules.

Of course, Jesus saw straight through it all, the washing of hands is something outward, something you do that others can see, it makes you look devout even if in your heart you are thinking unholy things. It's a way of keeping up appearances and up until that time these physical clues of following the rules publicly were all anyone had to go on to establish if they were surrounding themselves with godly people or heathens. What better way to ensure you are keeping good company, than to find people who know the rules and follow them.

Jesus disagreed, for him outward appearance was worthless. How many times did he use parables to prove his point, to prove God's point. The Good Samaritan, a heathen who did the right thing when the holy men did not, the prodigal son, a disobedient and insolent youth shown mercy and even favour from his father, the prayer of the tax collector held up as a shining example of devotion over the wordy ramblings of the proud Pharisees, the widow's offering shown to be of more worth than the bare tithe of a wealthy person. Time and time again Jesus shows us that we can in fact know something of the heart of another through their actions but we need to stop checking their behaviour off against a list of human laws and start comparing them to God's law of love.

When we go back to basics, to the covenant God made between Godself and Abraham, it was all about what God would do for Abraham, all that was required in

return was for Abraham to trust God. The same with Noah and Israel and Joseph and Moses and so many others who were in relationship with God before the 10 commandments. Then those 10 rules were requested and given and they each pointed to the same truth, put God first in all that you do, remember God and trust in him and nothing else, and as you go about your daily living do no harm to those around you through theft of property, or life or relationship and honour those who care for you.

It's all still pretty straightforward, until we get to those 613 specific rules, meant to clarify the 10 commandments and to offer arbitration in every circumstance but which in fact complicated matters and made the whole keeping of laws far more human and far less Godly. It's easier for us to have them, in some ways, it makes it possible to live up to God's expectations if we can list every rule, memorise them and keep them. But while we do that with our mind and our logic, we risk ignoring the urges and responses of our heart. We cannot help the robbed man because we must not touch blood, we cannot welcome back a wayward son because there are rules about disobedient children, we must pray as we've been taught and only if we are good to begin with and the tithe is the tithe, if you work it out correctly you cannot get it wrong.

Jesus went back to basics. Forget 613 laws, remember the 10 from which the others originated. You can honour your father and mother and still have room for compassion for the child that fails but repents. You can put God first but still find a place for the ones who lost that path for a while and are struggling to find it again. God's favour was never in our control, however much we would like it to be, we are not on terms with the almighty that we can keep some rules and demand a response. God calls us as God wills, we need do one of two things, respond positively and accept this grace or ignore that call, even so, our ignorance need not last forever.

So what must we do then, to live out the instruction we have receive from scripture today? How can we be doers of the word and not hearers only? It will be different for each of us. First we go back to basics with Jesus and clear away the clutter to what is necessary. We prioritise God in our life, we find ways to pray, to study and to worship. That's the first thing, then we love our neighbour as ourselves and we are as indiscriminate about who that neighbour is as God is. We stop worrying about what our actions look like on the outside, to other people, and we start acting on what our heart yearns for, whether that is looking after others, practical help for the needy, teaching, befriending, praying for others, making tea, working in op shops, visiting in hospitals, supporting charities.

Whatever we do as we go out from this place today, let us feel the challenge of the letter of James. When we pray this week let us think not of how an unknown entity will be used by God to answer our prayers but how we can do something to make a difference. Let us be doers of the word in some small way – that all our doings may glorify God and further God's kingdom.