

With dirty hands

30 8 09

Almighty and everlasting God,
you are always more ready to hear than we to pray
and to give more than either we desire or deserve:
pour down upon us the abundance of your mercy,
forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid
and giving us those good things which are not worthy to ask.

My text may be found in today's gospel from Mark, 'Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders but eat with defiled hands?' (7 v5) -in short: why do they eat with dirty hands?

The English, God bless them, are obsessed with hygiene. The proverb 'Cleanliness is next to Godliness' surely embodies an essential part of our national character. We have a horror of dirt and we do everything in our power to keep our homes and ourselves clean. Given the potential panic inherent in a pandemic of swine flu, isn't it nice to be reassured that our priests in the Church of England have been instructed to wash their hand in this type of anti-bacterial gel before and after celebrating Holy Communion?

In today's gospel from Mark, we have the Pharisees criticising Jesus indirectly for the behaviour of his disciples. It's like implicitly criticising the Head Mistress of a school by commenting on the behaviour of her pupils; in the 1930s, for example,

residents of Islington might have criticised Miss Bozeman's leadership of the Lady Owen School by voicing their concern that her girls have been seen walking in the street without their Panama hats, eating sweets in public and talking to boys from Owen's School! And here it is eating in public that is being picked up on by the Pharisees. But the real issue in question is not the fact of the eating itself but whether the people eating have first washed their hands so that their kosher food is not possibly polluted by having dirty hands.

The Pharisees determined morality, what actions are morally correct, by reference to God-given rules. Thus standards of behaviour for a Pharisee were right because an action conformed to what God intended to be good for the right order of society. As such, then, Pharisees were rule-based moralists for what was important for a Pharisee was to judge an action, any action, every action, by a God-given or God-informed rule. The Ten Commandments are an excellent example of the former; giving a tenth of the mint in your herb garden to the poor an example of the latter.

The clash between Jesus and the Pharisees over their moral understanding of the world is an interesting one. It is not that Jesus disrespected the Law; in fact, he acknowledged its worth as an ethical gold standard as we can see from Matthew's Gospel in his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount when he says, 'Do not think

that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.’ (5 v17 – 18). What Jesus is criticising the Pharisees of is making the rule the end not the means to an end. If you like, the Pharisees’ fault according to Jesus was that the Pharisees were making a god of the rule instead of seeing how the proper obedience to a rule should, in fact, lead people to God.

By now, you will have probably have had more than enough of the scandal over MPs expenses at Westminster but it is an interesting contemporary example of what it means to be a Pharisee. Now I don’t include in this category those MPs who fraudulently claimed expenses against Mortgages they had already paid off – that is a criminal offence whether or not they forgot they had already settled the loan. Rather I want to highlight the majority of those MPs whose only guilt lay in legally claiming what they were entitled to claim by the rules they themselves agreed but that which the public now thought as improper: for example, to clear your moat; to fund a floating island for your ducks; the purchase of an excessive number of plasma screen TVs; and the constant shuffling of what residence was nominated as your first or second home and whether your family could live there too rent-free! All these were legitimate expenses according to the rules; the problem arises in that the public no longer believes such rules and the MPs

interpretation of such rules to be right.

Jesus lost patience with the excessive legalism of the Pharisees just as the public no longer has sympathy for their elected representatives. But at least the Pharisees were not trying to make life easier for themselves: their hypocrisy did not lie in teaching people to do one thing and doing the opposite themselves. No rather they made the rule the thing to judge godliness by whereas Jesus was not concerned with trivia but with the bigger picture.

I guess in this instance, then, that Jesus is telling the Pharisees not to be so concerned with a bit of dirt on someone's hands when what was truly at issue is the dirt that comes out of someone's mouth. Jesus is telling the Pharisees in no uncertain terms that instead of nit-picking about small imperfections, they should address the real causes of moral pollution like 'fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within and they defile a person.' (Mark 7v21 – 23)

So as rule, when we are deciding what is the morally right thing to do, perhaps we should ask ourselves what principle underlies a rule rather than mindless obedience to that rule.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's Dinard

30th August, 2009

H: Sermon 20: With dirty hands

