

29 August 2021

Song of Songs 2.8-13

⁸ Listen! My beloved! Look! Here he comes, leaping across the mountains, bounding over the hills. ⁹ My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look! There he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, peering through the lattice.

¹⁰ My beloved spoke and said to me, 'Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, come with me. ¹¹ See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone.

¹² Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come; the cooing of doves is heard in our land. ¹³ The fig-tree forms its early fruit; the blossoming vines spread their fragrance. Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me.'

Hear the word of the Lord,

Psalm 45.1-2, 45.6-9

¹ My heart is astir with fine phrases,
I make my song for a king:
my tongue is the pen of a ready writer.

² You are the fairest of men,
grace flows from your lips:
therefore has God blessed you for ever and ever.

⁶ Your throne is the throne of God, it endures for ever:
and the sceptre of your kingdom is a righteous sceptre.

⁷ You have loved righteousness and hated evil:
therefore God, your God, has anointed you
with the oil of gladness above your fellows.

⁸ All your garments are fragrant
with myrrh, aloes and cassia:
music from ivory palaces makes you glad.

⁹ Kings' daughters are among your noble women:
the queen is at your right hand in gold of Ophir.

James 1.17-27

¹⁷ Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

¹⁸ He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created.

¹⁹ My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, ²⁰ because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.

²¹ Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

²² Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. ²³ Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴ and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.

²⁵ But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continues in it – not forgetting what they have heard but doing it – they will be blessed in what they do.

²⁶ Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.

²⁷ Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Mark 7.1-8, 14-23

¹ The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered round Jesus ² and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. ³ (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. ⁴ When they come from the market-place they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

⁵ So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, 'Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?' ⁶ He replied, 'Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "'These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. ⁷ They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.'" ⁸ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.'

¹⁴ Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, 'Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. ¹⁵ Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.'

¹⁷ After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. ¹⁸ 'Are you so dull?' he asked. 'Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? ¹⁹ For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body.' (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.)

²⁰ He went on: 'What comes out of a person is what defiles them. ²¹ For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come – sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²² adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. ²³ All these evils come from inside and defile a person.'



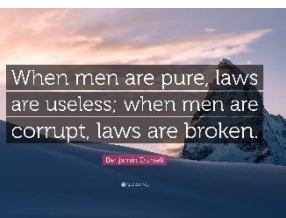
Hallo church, here we are again, church: celebrating our unity while apart. It is not quite like we are used to meeting but we are still church. I don't have the gift of prophecy, at least about this situation, and I don't know how long we will have to continue having zoom and virtual services, but I know that God has not abandoned us, and he is still with us through these services and as we go about our daily lives. I remember that old saying: I don't know what the future holds but I know who holds the future.

We have known for some time that church would somehow have to change to survive in the coming decades, but this is somewhat quicker and more dramatic than we were expecting. Hopefully some time in the coming weeks or months we will be able to meet, physically in our beloved church buildings, in the way where we all feel comfortable but, in the decades, to come will there be enough priests, or enough money to pay the priests to travel around and conduct services, and enough money to continue to maintain our beautiful buildings? I am hopeful that many of our buildings can remain although we may need to find other uses for them as well as a place to worship but one possibility is that priests will conduct a service in one centre, and it be simultaneously transmitted to other places where people are gathered as well as to people in their own homes.



We will need to find way to continue in fellowship, ways to uphold and encourage each other but it may not look the way we have done it all our lives. God will do something new, something like this or something totally different, I don't know, but I do know that he will not abandon his church and his people, as the psalmist said: Your throne is the throne of God, it endures for ever: and the sceptre of your kingdom is a righteous sceptre.

In our reading from Mark today Jesus was suggesting something radically different to everything that his listeners took for granted. It all started with the pharisees observing that Jesus' disciples did not wash their hands as prescribed in the ritual laws. They were questioning Jesus' authority as a religious teacher: what kind of a leader could he be if he didn't even bother to teach his followers the basic religious rules?



In the Old Testament there are dozens of rules about daily life and what foods were allowed or not. In the days of Moses when most of these rules were written people had no idea of hygiene so God gave them basic instructions to protect them from disease. Washing hands is basic hygiene, pork and some seafoods were often contaminated with infections etc etc, but the religious leaders insisted on their observance as a religious practice.

Jesus, knowing the reality behind these regulations, declares that they are not important but what is important is the motivation behind the behaviours. This is not something that the religious leaders of that time wanted to hear, the very idea was very disturbing.



When we were young church was well attended, most people in society gave lip service to Christian values and rich people made big contributions but what were their hearts really like? In secret there were plenty of people who were abusive, sexual immoral, thieves, murders, adulterers, greedy, cruel, deceitful, lewd, envious, slanderous, arrogant, foolish and many other selfish and unpleasant things. Some even used the church as a shield to hide their actions. The reason we nowadays must have police checks and fill in all these boring, intrusive forms for 'Safe ministries' is to try to reduce those practices but none of us is perfect, so we follow all the safe ministry guidelines as well.

Perhaps Isaiah prophesied about those people as well; "These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. ⁷ They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules."

But can you hear their motive?

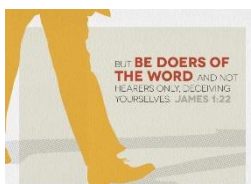
Jesus is talking about what comes out of the heart. The purity laws, he's suggesting, point to the real need of human for a deeper purity, a purity of motive. Eating foods or lighting the candles in church in a particular order, won't affect that. Those who get stuck on regulations and never progress to the real point, are quite literally missing the heart of the matter. By focussing on outward regulations, they are avoiding the deeper challenge of the gospel, the challenge to the human heart.

Every time the church updates something, when the bible was first translated into English, each time the prayer book or even the hymn book gets updated, every time there are new practices brought in it makes people feel uncomfortable. We don't like change, but there is a need for us to think and discern what is God's unshakeable decrees and what are rules? Many of the rituals and practices we love were made by devout, well-meaning people seeking to honour God. Sometimes we need to hear God say that that season is past, and it is time to do something new.



Jesus is insisting that good and bad external and physical actions come from internal and spiritual sources and therefore it is these which must be pure. What makes you or I a Christian, is our faith and trust and obedience to the living God, not merely following the ritual that we love but using them to draw us closer to God and to remind us of the great truths of his word.

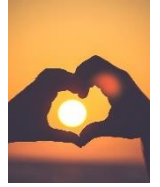
We eliminate, with His help all that is evil from our hearts and cultivate every good and perfect gift from above, not merely listening to the word, and so deceiving yourselves but doing what it says.



Whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continues in it will be blessed in what they do.

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Jesus is insisting that purity laws don't touch the real human problem and that is what the kingdom of God addresses.



When you arrive at your destination you no longer need all the signposts, because they have done their job, we no longer need to obey all the Jewish purity laws because we understand basic hygiene, we no longer need to read the King James Bible because language has changed and we now have better translations, we no longer need to live as children because we are grown up, we no longer need to follow the book of Common Prayer because society has changed, we no longer use phone boxes because most of us have phones, change is inevitable and the only way to stay secure is to make sure that that we are following Jesus rather than tradition.

We do not know what the future holds for ourselves, our families, our communities, our churches or the world but we continue to trust and follow our Lord knowing that he will lead us and guide us through all the changes, and in the meantime, we obey all that He has commanded us.



Sentence

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. James 1.17

Prayer of the Day

Cleanse our consciences, O Lord,
and enlighten our hearts
through the daily presence of your Son Jesus Christ,
that when he comes in glory to be our judge
we may be found undefiled and acceptable in his sight;
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.