

Sermon 8 September 2024 Reflecting God in our lives

James 1:19-27 Mark 7:1-8

This Gospel passage really does highlight the difference between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders, the Pharisees. It highlights an accusation frequently levelled at the Pharisees by Jesus – that they are too preoccupied with their rules and regulations to the exclusion of what is really important, the expressing of God's love to all and sundry.

In this case, the Pharisees are criticising some of the disciples for not following the prescribed ritual of hand-washing before eating food. This ritual was very particular and was not really in the interests of hygienic purity, but rather was ceremonial. Before every meal and between every course the hands had to be washed in a certain way.

Anyone failing to adhere to these regulations was considered to be unclean in the sight of God. But Jesus saw it differently. In his eyes, by focusing on these rules and regulation, the Pharisees lost sight of what the law of God was really all about – to love God and love one another. *'Jesus replied, "You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you, for he wrote, 'These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship is a farce, for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God.' For you ignore God's law and substitute your own tradition.'"*

As a church, I believe we need to take on board these words of Jesus. Bishop Ross hinted at this when he preached here a few months ago. He said, *'We create structures and processes in the church's life to ensure order, but we must not allow our structures to constrain us in our responsibility to help others to experience the grace of the gospel. In our endeavours to allow for the dynamism of the Spirit to guide our life and to affect people by the love and grace of God, we want to be free of the bureaucracy and rules that seem to get in our way.'* Richard Rohr, in his book, 'The Universal Christ,' writes, *'Our religion has become so focused on obedience and conformity, instead of on love and worship in any practical or expanding sense.'* Food for thought. This is something I strongly believe, and something we really need to subscribe to, in action and not just words, if we are to grow as a church. I could say more but I will leave it at that for now.

Going back to Jesus and the Pharisees. What also made him angry was that in the strict implementation of these laws, the Pharisees made themselves the focal point of religion instead of God and his message.

Jesus called the Pharisees 'hypocrites.' The Greek word *hypokrites* from which 'hypocrite' comes, has an interesting background. It originally meant 'someone who answers,' but progressed to mean 'someone who answers in a set dialogue,' in other words, an actor. And so finally, it came to mean someone whose life is something of an act, that is, they say one thing but do something quite different.

This is one of the rather negative perceptions many people have of Christians, and John McClean alluded to this negative perception in his sermon last Sunday. So, this leads us on to the message for you and me in this Gospel passage. In the end, for any passage to serve its real purpose, we must be able to extract a message from it and apply it to our everyday lives. The message for me is that quite simply, we can attend church, read the Bible etc but if our lives do not reflect what God wants us to be, then it is not only rather meaningless, but we are in danger of being justifiably labelled as hypocrites. Let me tell you a story. It is a parable.

Two cars were waiting at a red light. The light turns green, but the man in the front car didn't notice it. A woman in the car behind him begins pounding on the steering wheel and yelling at the man to move. The

man doesn't move. The woman is going ballistic, ranting and raving at the man, pounding the dashboard with her fists.

The light turns orange and the woman begins to blow the car horn and scream profanities and curses at the man. The man looks up, sees the orange light and accelerates through the intersection just as the light turns red. The woman is beside herself, screaming in frustration as she misses her chance to get through the intersection.

As she is still in mid-rant, there is a tap on the window and she looks up to see a cop standing there. The cop tells her to get out of the car and keep her hands out in front of her. She complies, speechless at what is happening. The cop snaps handcuffs on her and hustles her into the patrol car. She is too bewildered to ask any questions and is driven to the station where she is finger-printed and placed in a cell.

After a couple of hours, she is fetched from the cell and taken to the booking desk where the original cop is waiting. He hands her the bag containing her things and says, 'I'm sorry for this mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn and abusing the driver in front of you. Then I noticed your bumper sticker which read, "Jesus loves you," the sticker on your back windscreen which read, 'Follow me to Sunday School,' and also the Christian fish emblem on the trunk of the car. So, naturally I thought the car couldn't have belonged to you and that you must have stolen it!'

We are all human, every one of us, but we do need to ensure that, as much as possible, the way we conduct ourselves reflects what we stand for and what we believe in. It's what we do, not so much what we say, that determines whether we are good Christians or not. Remember this, to garner respect our actions must always reflect what we profess to believe. Or as St Ignatius of Loyola said, *'In God's eyes our words have only the value of our actions.'*

I want to finish by referring to our first reading from James, and in particular verse 22: *'But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves.'* James, in his usual forthright way, is telling us that sitting in church listening to God's word, whether through the readings or the sermon, doesn't actually make us Christians. It is only when we live out that word, Monday to Saturday, that we can justify the label of 'Christian.' God's word has not been truly received until it has been put into action.

Paul makes this point in Romans 2:13 – *'For merely listening to the Word doesn't make us right with God. It is obeying the Word that makes us right in his sight.'* Jesus himself reiterates this: *'Jesus replied, "But even more blessed are all who hear the word of God and put it into practice."* Luke 11:28.

My friends, I cannot stress this more strongly. We are all very human but our own integrity is at stake here, not to mention the integrity of our church, and by that I mean the church as an institution, the church body, or to put another slant on it, the church as Christ's body. As John McClean said last week, we, you and me, are the church. What we do and how we conduct ourselves will determine the nature and the effectiveness of the church. Christ works through us and depends on us to do his work, to build up his church as an agent of ministry to our community. A grand building is fine, and will certainly facilitate that ministry, but ultimately the responsibility and functioning of that ministry lies with us. And that entails listening to God's word and actually putting it into action.

