

I spent quite a few years of my life living in Saudi Arabia, a Muslim country in the Middle East. When I looked at this reading, it took me straight back to our days in Jeddah. What a culture shock it was to arrive in a place so different from Australia. We were young, our kids were only four and six. When we arrived at Jeddah Airport we had to step over pilgrims sleeping on the ground waiting for their flights home because they couldn't afford a hotel room. The lost luggage filled an entire room, stacked floor to ceiling. Everything was dirty, everywhere you looked there was rubbish. We discovered later there was no such thing as a regular rubbish collection; most people just threw their rubbish over the fence into the street where everyone just drove over it or walked around it. Herds of goats wandered down the street, donkey carts delivered water.

We drove past the milk bottling plant which looked more like an industrial site than a plant producing food for human consumption. We were further put off by the flimsy, green plastic bottles used to contain the milk and promptly decided that we could live on powdered milk for the next two years.

So much of what we were seeing then must have been very similar to old testament times. Horrible, unhealthy conditions that led to the development of laws and practices which today we simply call good hygiene.

Well, perhaps Jeddah in the nineteen-seventies was a little more advanced. There were high rise buildings and shops of sorts, as well as the souks or local market places. We shopped for food in the Saudi equivalent of the 'corner store'; aisles crammed with boxes stacked almost to the ceiling. You had to sidle past the stacked boxes just to reach the items you wanted. Graeme was despatched to get the bread. This was literally the epitome of a 'bun fight'. As the bread came out of the ovens, everyone rushed around behind the counter, grabbing bread sticks from the trays as they were pulled out of the oven. It almost came to blows when two people found themselves holding different ends of the same roll! If you could get it into a paper bag at least you knew it was fresh and fairly uncontaminated. The fruit and vegetables were reputed to be grown in somewhat dubious conditions – manure was mentioned. So, the shopping regime was, come home, unpack the groceries, tip the fruit and vegetables into the kitchen sink, fill with water, add a healthy dose of chlorine bleach and soak for an hour or so before rinsing off.

We didn't even think of buying meat from the butcher shop, what with the flies buzzing around goodness knows what sort of meat hanging on the hooks. We bought our meat from the cold store – Aussie lamb packed and frozen and shipped from Australia.

We did what it took to stay healthy!

Which is almost certainly where the Old Testament purity laws came from. Laws handed down from generation to generation to keep people healthy. Moses brought these laws to a people living in the desert, in primitive conditions. But over the years, the laws had become an end in themselves. Laws that had become embellished and extended and onerous. Requiring meticulous adherence to the letter of the law. Laws to be obeyed for the sake of obeying the laws. To belong you needed to abide by the rules.

And where are we now? In these COVID times? Over the last year and a half, we have all become very familiar with the covid rules - wash your hands, wipe down surfaces with antiseptic, keep a social distance, wear a face mask at all times. I suppose I should add "if you feel any symptoms at all, get tested, and above all, get vaccinated.

We wonder what happened in the beginning of the pandemic that things got so out of control so that the only course of action appears to be to lock people down, restrict their movement and put a curfew in place. As a result, of course, we now have people complaining about the restrictions put in place to keep us all safe.

Even without COVID, we have largely adopted ancient Jewish practice into our current life with regard to washing our hands, washing food, washing pots and pans. We have confirmed that this is good hygiene and that people are healthier and do not get as many diseases if they wash their hands and dishes, which was not the general custom in the ancient world.

However, what also accompanied this sensible hygiene practice was a series of very restrictive laws with regard to what made people unclean. Jewish law was quite explicit about everything from the height of the sinks in your kitchen to how and what food you prepared. People and food were declared either 'clean' or 'unclean'.

The problem highlighted in today's gospel reading is not really about the rule – but rather the use to which the rule is put; a person is judged by how well they conform to the rule rather than the type of person they are. A simple and very sensible rule becomes a point of conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees.

You will note Jesus addresses three different audiences: the group of Pharisees and scribes who raise the question of defilement; the ever-present crowd; and the disciples who true to character, do not understand.

Jesus' message is delivered differently to each of these groups, but in essence it is the same. We are defiled (made unholy) not by what we take in, but by the betrayal of the human heart. The three different versions of this answer build on one another, thus leading to a fuller understanding of what is at stake. The message is 'we must prepare our hearts and thereby ourselves for the kingdom of God'.

The first audience, the Pharisees believed that following the rules made a person righteous – that is, 'right' with God. And so they asked the question

...why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands, that is without washing them?

Jesus understood this question was really meant to target him. A criticism that he himself did not follow the law. Asking why some of his followers "do not live according to the tradition of the elders" is really accusing Jesus of not following the law himself, of acting as if he believes himself to be above the law.

In the book of Exodus, before the giving of the law, God tells the people of Israel that they are to be a "priestly kingdom and a holy nation". The Pharisees took this calling to be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation very seriously. They interpreted the laws concerning priests serving in the temple to apply to all God's people and all aspects of life. As priests serving in the temple were required to wash their hands before entering the holy place or offering a sacrifice, the Pharisees believed that all Jews should wash their hands before meals as a way of making the mealtime sacred, bringing every aspect of life under God's law.

The 'traditions of the elders' were seen as a way of preserving the Jewish faith and way of life, especially in the midst of the Roman occupation. The problem with the Pharisees and scribes, according to Jesus, was that they had become so focussed on the externals of faithfulness, that they neglected to examine their own hearts. The rituals they observed created a spiritual hierarchy between 'clean' and 'unclean'. Instead of expressing the holiness of God, ritual purity became a means of excluding people considered dirty or contaminated.

Jesus doesn't deny what his disciples did (or didn't do). He doesn't even justify what they are doing, explicitly. Instead he reaches way back through the tradition, all the way to the prophet Isaiah, quoting

...This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me"

This reproach is more than a condemnation of empty worship practices; it is a condemnation of the scribes' and Pharisees' distortion of tradition.

...you abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition...

Secondly, Jesus addresses himself to the crowd gathered around

...listen to me all of you and understand: there is nothing outside of a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile

Or to it put more simply 'don't worry about what you put into your mouth, worry about what comes out'.

The third audience to whom Jesus speaks are the disciples, who as we have come to expect, don't get it. So, Jesus provides further explanation for them

...for it is from within, from the heart, that evil intentions come

The heart is understood here to be the centre of the human will and rationality. It is the place from which all our intentions arise. Yes, evil intentions come from the heart, but also good intentions.

Over and over again during his ministry, Jesus says,

I have not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it

Jesus is declaring these laws not only invalid, but never valid. He has come to take people beyond ritual practices and lead them to a deeper understanding of what it means for the inner being.

Jesus warns that it is perfectly possible to keep up a good image – but, he says, this is not good enough.

There have been too many people in our time who have presented a good image while being anything but. Catholic priests abusing young children, men like Harvey Weinstein and Jeffrey Epstein who thought that they were entitled to commit sex offences with no culpability, politicians who say they are governing for the good of the country but are themselves corrupt, countries such as China and Myanmar who discriminate against their

ethnic citizens. And now this week, the Taliban who claim they will rule justly for all Afghans, and preserve the freedoms of women – “under Islamic law” – which leaves them plenty of wriggle room! In face of the untold atrocities performed in the name of Allah how can we believe them.

Jesus' answer to the criticism brought by the extremists was that people are not made unclean by outward things but by what comes from inside. It is generally understood that for everything that we say and do, there is something that lies behind our actions. We may be acting out of fear or hate or love or concern or whatever other emotion is driving us.

In every age, the religious communities have been tempted to substitute abstinence from certain food or drink as the definition of righteousness. Living in a Muslim country, I experienced first hand a society observing the fast of Ramadan. During the month of Ramadan, Muslims are forbidden from eating, drinking or smoking during the hours of daylight. A cannon is fired at dawn to proclaim the start of fasting, and again at sunset to mark the end of the fast. Shops are shut during the day but open all night. Most people stay at home during the day rather than going to work, and then party all night. To me, it seemed not so much going without, but rather simply turning day and night upside down and carrying on as usual.

And it's not always about food. And it's not just the Pharisees. Don't we sometimes find ourselves today where the Pharisees were? Don't we have our rituals?

There are churches where if you do not wear a suit, you are not holy.

There are churches where if you do not wear a hat you should not come into the church because you are not holy

There are churches where if you bring biscuits because you didn't have time to cook, you are not holy.

Have we not found ourselves believing there is only one way of doing things, because that is the way it has always been done. It has been an interesting exercise bringing our four churches together because each of our heritage churches had a certain way of doing things. We have had to learn to compromise, to acknowledge that just because “we” have always done it this way, ‘others’ have done it another way. It has been, I think you'll agree, an interesting journey!

The Jewish purity laws lent themselves to a sort of spiritual hierarchy, distinguishing between the ritually "clean" who considered themselves to be close to God, and the "unclean" who were shunned as impure sinners who are far from God. Instead of expressing the holiness of God, ritual purity became a means of excluding people considered dirty, polluted or contaminated. Jesus' whole ministry was about demolishing these distinctions. Sometimes, it seems, we haven't learnt a thing.

Rev Reggie Weaver sums it up this way,

It's okay to have rituals, it's okay to have tradition. But our rituals and traditions must never become our God. Rituals and traditions will not save us. They will not make us clean. If we want to be clean, we must look not at the works of our hands, but at our hearts.

It could all be so simple.
Listen to these words from Rev Martha Spong.

DIRTY HANDS

*They smudge the screen,
leave prints on the doorjamb
with their unwashed hands.*

*I send them to the sink,
call, "Did y'all use soap?"*

But Jesus says, "Come. Eat."

AMEN.

Chris Mitchell, 29 August, 2021