Trinity 14B 2 September 2018

Deuteronomy 4: 1-2, 6-9; James 1: 17-end; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

**How do you learn?** How do you absorb, process, comprehend and retain information? As we stand now, right at the beginning of a new academic year, this seems a pertinent question to consider.

I may have spoken before about the half-life of a sermon, which is generally held to be about half an hour. That is to say that by the time you leave the church building, you will already have forgotten most of what I have said. And then there’s that old saying attributed to Confucius: *What I hear, I forget; What I see, I remember; What I do, I understand.*

James, writing to the twelve tribes of the dispersion, the scattered tribes of the Jews, was clearly a fan of kinaesthetic learning, rather than visual or auditory. He told the people quite emphatically that listening was not enough. Faith has to be something that we engage in actively – if we merely hear the word of God, or see it written down, as soon as we turn away to do something else, we forget it. Whereas if we **do** the word of God, it is imprinted on us, it comes alive in us, it becomes something that we continue to do sort of by muscle memory, or habit.

The story we heard from Mark’s Gospel today is not an account of a confrontation between Jesus and some bad people. It is an account of a confrontation between Jesus and some people who were trying very hard to be good and godly people. The problem was that the godly life had a different shape and substance for them than it did for Jesus and his followers. And it strikes me that we encounter some of that conflict in our lives as Christians today.

There is a short book, less than 200 pages-worth, by a theologian called Dwight Zscheile, entitled Agile Church, which has been recommended to me but which I have not yet read. However, what I gather of it is that its premise is thinking about how to help churches flourish in a time of, quote, profound uncertainty and spiritual opportunity. In today’s fast-moving cultural environment, churches have to be more than faithful—they have to be agile. How do we do that?

Going back to the gospel passage from Mark 7: one of the main things that emerges is that the Pharisees are scandalised by the fact that the followers of Jesus are not following what they, the Pharisees, refer to as ‘the traditions of the elders’ – washing their hands before eating in this case. We are told that all Jews observe that ritual, although that may be something of an exaggeration of what actually happened – we can’t be sure that the Sadducees did follow that rule, but that is slightly beside the point…. And so Jesus draws them into the reflection that what is important is what is going on in the heart. And he says that it’s not what goes into a person that defiles them; it’s what comes out.

What comes out of Dwight Zschiele’s book is in fact in part the question: how much of the life we engage in, what we are about, as Christian churches and Christian congregations, how much of that life are we doing because this is the way we have always done it? And do we just keep trying harder and harder at the same old thing in the hope that more people will come and be engaged in this life of ours. And should we in fact take a step back and ask ourselves how much we are focusing on the surface and missing the real point.

Jesus calls the Pharisees hypocrites – which sounds harsh but it really meant acting, putting on a mask for a role – so again looking at the surface, the appearance, rather than what was underneath. Are we focusing on the surface and believing that somehow things – attendance statistics to name but one thing - will be turned round when actually the world has changed so much that we need to be reminding ourselves of what is the heart of the matter; and how do we engage with the heart of the matter in ways that communicate what the heart of the matter is.

Is the heart of the matter that people turn up on Sunday morning because that is what they have always done, or is the heart of the matter that we, collectively, need to find ways of listening to people, of engaging with people; ways that connect the Christian gospel and tradition with what is actually going on in people’s lives, with their spiritual questions and hopes. So that we don’t impose a particular sense of ‘if you do it this way everything will be alright’, when the ‘this way’ makes so little sense to so many people.

And how much of what we do as Christians is because duty says we ought to, or the expectation is that….? Rather than: are we actually attending to the heart of the gospel and what the truth of Jesus is, and the freedom that Jesus brings and the life that Jesus promises.

We are so often Pharisees in our real life and attitudes; we think we know how the world should be: we have firm views on morality, on the church’s traditions and decisions. We may have our faults too – but being wrong isn’t one of them… We are, at the very least, righter than everyone else is.

The Pharisees were not concerned about washing their hands in order to get rid of germs. They washed their hands as a kind of a ceremony; a ceremony where the basic purpose was to remind themselves that they were clean and that other people were dirty. In other words, it was a ritual to help the Pharisees remind themselves that they were right, and that others were not.

 Jesus’ position was that, insofar as a ritual or practice was a means for expressing an inner, spiritual reality, it was fine and good. But when the performance of the ritual became an end in itself and became rigid and inflexible and burdensome, it was not good. Jesus teaches a religion of freedom and love, not fear and bondage.

I was fascinated and more than a bit horrified recently when I was preparing to conduct a baptism - a rare one outside of our monthly Sunday morning ones - and the family and friends were gathered outside on the path. I went out into the porch to encourage the children who happened to be nearest to help bring the adults and others into church so that we could start. The uncertainty and fear of crossing the threshold expressed both verbally and by body language was palpable. This is indeed an alien environment, full of strange and alien customs. We who are inside often don’t notice, but the people on the other side – even if they are curious, or have a reason to come in, as they did for that baptism – surely do.

I would never advocate losing our traditions, but we need to lose some of our inhibitions I think. If we truly know ourselves to be sinners, we don’t need to worry about consorting with other sinners. If we know our own doctrines to be imperfect, then we can listen to those who question them. Jesus calls us not to a religion of boundaries but to a faith that is open and inclusive. The Pharisees demonstrated a growing sense of having a firm hold on God. They believed they knew God, that God listened to them and came to their rescue when they called. But followers of Jesus need a growing sense of God having a firm hold on us. Our calling is to be God’s servants, not God’s protectors. God really doesn’t need our protection.

And to that end, we return to James’ letter: those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

Having heard the gospel, can we go out this week and do the gospel? For by doing, we imprint it on our own hearts and also on the hearts of those we meet.

**Amen**