

HANDWASHING CLEAN AND UNCLEAN

Bible Readings

James 1:17-27

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

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

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

Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. 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, 14-15 & 21-23

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

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?”

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.

They worship me in vain;
their teachings are merely human rules.’
You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”

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

For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.”

Bible Reflection

Over the last 18 months, we have been reminded that we need to wash our hands often. We need to maintain social distance. We need to be careful and stay home if we are sick. And there are many videos online that are happy to teach us the right way to wash our hands.

But washing our hands is neither the beginning nor the ending of the process. There are five things that we are being told at the moment.

1. Wash our hands, often.
2. Practice Social Distancing.
3. Wear a face covering.
4. Get vaccinated.
5. Stay home if you are sick.

Rules, laws and guidelines can all be helpful. In the case of coronavirus we all understand the need for them. But sometimes people make up rules or misinterpret rules just for their own benefit. In our Gospel reading today, Jesus was challenging the Pharisees and their interpretation of the Law.

Jesus wasn’t opposed to washing your hands before you eat. He was opposed to worrying more about what was on the outside than what was on the inside. He said that what comes out of a person shows what is inside.

We can wash our hands constantly, and we can probably avoid getting sick as a result. But Jesus would ask us if we were already sick inside before we washed our hands. There are many things that will cause our hearts to be unhealthy. We often speak about the two commandments that Jesus called us to follow. Love the Lord our God with all of our hearts, soul, and might, and love our neighbour as ourselves.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus confronts the Pharisees and tells them that they need to give to the poor, something that is a common theme in his discussions. You see, the

Pharisees were so busy following the law that they were missing the most important thing. They were failing to love.

They followed God out of a sense of obligation. And while they might give money to the church if people were watching, it was all about show. They did not care for the poor or those in need. Their hearts had turned to stone.

Over the last 18 months we have seen many events cancelled. We have seen schools closed. We have seen our society turned upside down. The truth is that all gathering is a risk. When we gather together, in small groups or large, we carry a risk of passing on a virus, whether it is flu, or Covid 19, or any other common thing that is going around. But gathering with people is at the heart of who we are and what we do. It is here that we don't just come together for worship, but we come together to serve.

When I think of church, I don't think of it as a social gathering, I think of it as people taking care of people, loving and serving each other. Jesus would call it loving our neighbours. That is what church is about.

We can continue to be careful, bumping elbows instead of shaking hands or having a hug, avoiding that social touching that we were used to. But we can still gather to serve the world. Each of us will make the choice about whether it is safe for us to attend. There is no right answer, only the answer we can live with. We shouldn't judge others if they are not yet comfortable in meeting others. We need to continue to be disciples, whether we meet in a church building or not.

In our first reading today, from the book of James, we read that we should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. Over recent months, I have noticed many people getting frustrated and angry. Maybe it is from being in lockdown for so long. Maybe they are worried about losing their job, their health, or a loved one. We need to be patient with one another. If we take the time to really listen to our loved ones, our friends, neighbours and colleagues, we might be able to help them rediscover a sense of hope, a sense of God's loving presence, and a real sense of peace.

The world seems to be in a state of turmoil at the moment, and not just because of the coronavirus. There is the awful situation in Afghanistan, the terrible earthquake and storm in Haiti, and the many areas of the world suffering from drought, flooding, wildfires, or extreme temperatures. The world needs healing. We all need healing in some way, whether it is physical, mental or spiritual.

The good news is that God wants to heal us. The only way that we can receive that complete healing is by loving God and loving our neighbour. If we do that, then we will find healing, a real sense of peace, and an awareness of God's loving presence. Then we will also draw other people to God and help them to be healed.

So, let us focus on loving God and loving our neighbour. How can we focus on God? Here are 7 things that we can do that will help us come closer to God.

1. Think of things to thank God for. 'Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things' (Philippians 4:8).
2. Rest in the presence of the Lord. 'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me' (Psalm 23:4).
3. Stop carrying your burdens by yourself. 'Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest' (Matthew 11:28).
4. Trust in God's plan, not your own. 'For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for peace and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope' (Jeremiah 29:11).
5. Ask God to hold your worries in his loving hands. 'Cast all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you' (1 Peter 5:7).
6. Set your focus on Jesus, not your needs. 'Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you' (Matthew 6:33).
7. Ask Jesus for his peace and strength. 'In me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world' (John 16:33).

Let us be part of the healing process for our church, our community, our country, and the world, by sharing God's love with the people we meet day by day. Amen.

Frank