

Proper 17

Sunday between 28 August and 3 September inclusive

Principal Service readings

Deuteronomy 4.1-2, 6-9	Keep God's commandments and teach them to your children
Psalm 15	Those who act uprightly can dwell with the Lord
James 1.17-27	Welcome God's Word and act on it
Mark 7.1-8,14-15,21-23	Being clean on the inside rather than the outside

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
speak to our hearts in the stillness,
keep us steadfast in the foundation that cannot be shaken,
lift up our eyes to behold the vision of your glory;
and perfect our faith, now and always. Amen.

Society of Saint Francis

Gospel Reading

Human tradition and divine ways

¹When the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, ²they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ³(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) ⁵So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?' ⁶He said to them, 'Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

"This people honours me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
⁷in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines."

⁸You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.'

¹⁴Then he called the crowd again and said to them, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.' ²¹For it is from within, from the

human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²²adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.'

Mark 7.1-8,14-15,21-23 NRSV¹

Comments and Questions

It is not surprising that the Pharisees and scribes come to Jesus with a critical attitude. Mark has previously related a number of controversies with them, and has told us in the story of the man with a withered hand that 'the Pharisees went out and immediately took counsel with the Herodians against him to put him to death' (Mark 3.6).

'Cleanliness is next to godliness' is still quoted, despite what Jesus says here. Jesus was undermining that very saying. Although this saying is not in the Bible there are a lot of washing rituals in the Old Testament, for example, Exodus 30:17-21; 38:8, about washing before approaching the altar. Jesus makes the explicit point that it is what is on the inside that matters – washing on the outside won't wash away impure thoughts or intentions. Appearances can be deceptive.

In the passage, Jesus speaks to three groups of people: the Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem, the crowd, and the disciples. Mark notes that the Pharisees and scribes are from Jerusalem (7.1). This is where Jesus will end up and Mark's narrative is progressing rapidly towards this significant place where Jesus is to die.

The question from the scribes and Pharisees is about ritual purity, but Jesus speaks about true purity, or, rather, impurity. By quoting Isaiah Jesus shows that he is well aware of 'the tradition of the elders'. He says that his questioners cling onto human tradition and ignore the commandment of God (7.8). He doesn't say what this is exactly, but we could take Leviticus 11.44: 'Be holy, for I am holy'. Jesus is concerned with what is going on in inside a person, not with outward appearances.

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Quotations

1

Character is like a tree and reputation its shadow. The shadow is what we think it is and the tree is the real thing.

Abraham Lincoln, 1809–1865

2

People do not wish to appear foolish; to avoid the appearance of foolishness, they are willing to remain actually fools.

Alice Walker, 1944–

Related topics

For further study:

Word of God – Scripture – liturgy of the Word; Commandments; Morality; Conversion, discipleship, Church – people of God, shepherd, pilgrim; Church structure; social teaching; commandment justice – hierarchy

Closing Prayer

Come close to us, O God,
and with your word of truth
purify the intentions of our hearts.
Let us walk in your law of liberty
as doers who act and are blessed in their doing,
so that what we profess with our lips
we may carry out in our lives
for the sake of your praise and glory,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Celebrating the Christian Year · Proper 17, Year B²

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² *Celebrating the Christian year : prayers and resources for Sundays, holy days and festivals, years A, B and C / compiled by Alan Griffiths. – 3 vols. – Norwich : Canterbury Press, 2004-5.*