



THE NEW SHOFAR

Beware of judging of your brothers and sisters in faith

Deuteronomy 4:1-9 - Mark 1:1-23

Trinity 15

Some ate, and some did not – and so the first Church division occurs!

One of the really interesting but very important part of today's narrative is the way Mark points out how *some of the disciples were eating the bread with unwashed hands*. If some were eating it means some were not. The group is now divided, and it is this division that becomes the focus of attention for Jesus as he goes on to teach them. On top of this observation it is also important to remind ourselves that Mark is writing for his own Church and this situation from the life of Jesus is addressed to them.

But this is the way we have always understood these things!

These Pharisees had come to listen to Jesus with ill will in their minds. The language Mark uses is strong, suggesting they have come seeking wrongdoing. If anyone looks for “sin” or “failure” in another group or person, especially if that other group sees things in a different manner, they will most surely find it or read “sin” into otherwise harmless things. This happens here.

They come to judge Jesus and the disciples in the light of the *traditions of the elders*. These *traditions* are in fact interpretations of the Law of Moses. The Pharisees spend all of their efforts trying to ensure the people of the land understand the way their *traditions* have the same importance as God's Law. The reality is, they are nothing more than human interpretations. They are a constantly growing body of regulations that are meant to ensure the people do what God wants. They (the Pharisees) see this as being important because God is only happy when every last detail of the Law is obeyed. To change these traditions is to risk damnation for the whole of the nation.

The traditions can make just about anything “unclean”

Israel's Law did not say this. Furthermore, not all Jews practiced this tradition of washing before eating. Some did, and it seems likely some of the disciples did wash before eating the bread. For others it was not important and certainly not a legal requirement! This washing was a good and pious thing, but it was more about personal spirituality, personal preferences than about the will of God. As Jesus will point out, the road to God is and the blessings of the Kingdom are many and varied. The only essential element on this Way to salvation is and always will be, Jesus.

These people honour me with their lips but ignore me in their hearts (says Jesus)

When Jesus rebukes these Pharisees he does so with a quotation from the prophet Isaiah, a man writing some seven hundred years before Jesus appeared on earth. These evils of having one group of the faithful judging and condemning other believers has a long, long history – even continuing today! What stands judged is this practice of turning the rules, precepts and traditions of men and women into doctrines – the truths, revelations and demands of God.

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Isaiah was speaking about the situation in Jerusalem and addressing the religious leaders in Israel's capital. Jesus is doing the same thing, pointing out the ocean of difference between *human precepts* and *the will of God (doctrine)*. What might be a good human precept for today will have been modified tomorrow but the divine Truth is eternal. The thing making this situation even worse is the way they dilute or abandon altogether the real commandments of God.

What then makes a person “unclean”?

The biblical idea of being *clean* or *unclean* relates to our relationship with God. It is about what entitles us to presume we can come into God's present and offer prayers and sacrifices. This makes Jesus' response to the Pharisees more than exciting and challenging. These distinctions do not come out of what a person *does* or *does not* do. These disciples are not *unclean* in God's eyes because they eat without washing their hands. The other disciples are not *clean* because they washed. The washing has nothing to do with their status in grace. Hence Jesus' question about what makes a person “unclean” – is it something that goes into a body or the things that come out of the body.

The things that defile come from the heart, from our human centre. That Mark was dealing with challenges in his own community is apparent from other New Testament writings. We know from Acts and from Paul how there were passionate battles within the faith community between those who wanted to have all of the Laws of Moses accepted as a part of Christian beliefs and practices. Some wanted to insist on circumcision others did not. Some wanted food restrictions, others wanted freedom. The problem for Mark seems to be how these differences among righteous people was killing the mission of the Gospel, degrading the Church in the eyes of the world, in the thinking of the unbelievers who were watching in amazement as rumour, gossip, slander and conflicted divided Christ's body.

It comes back to basic weaknesses – slander, gossip, pride, foolishness

The greatest threats to the Church of Mark's time – and in our own time today – are to be found within the Church, within the local faith communities. The only real hindrances to the spread of the Gospel, to the transformation of the world in the light of the Kingdom of God are to be found within believers, within us – within you and within me. Persecutions, martyrdoms, rejection and indifference can never stand against the advance of God's reign on earth. However, believers themselves can and do.

He is not telling the Pharisees they are wrong to insist on washing before eating. What he condemns is the arrogance that means everyone is being judged according to their customs, their traditions and their understanding of the will of God. They are hypocrites because they judge others by what they are doing or not doing. Judging is God's work. God's business. Their vocation is to model faithfulness that others may see what faithfulness means, can experience the blessings that come from living in a close and intimate relationship with God, in Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.

The mouth reflects what is hidden in the human heart

It is truly amazing to read through the New Testament and observe the number of times the writers feel obliged to condemn gossip, rumour mongering, calumny, vilification and so on. If love reigned in the hearts of Christians such evils would not flow from their mouths. That it does speaks volumes about how far these sinners are from the Kingdom of God. All of their Sunday worship, good deeds, prayers, bible study and the like will not save them. That is the tough message and warning here from Jesus. It is Paul who describes for us the characteristics of a Church under the Holy Spirit... it will flow with *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5)*

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