

**Sunday September 2<sup>nd</sup>**

**James 1: 17-27 Mark 7: 1-8, 14, 15, 21-23**

Heavenly Father, through weak human words, give us grace to hear your true and living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord and the courage with your Spirit's help to put into practice what we hear. Amen

I wonder how many times you've washed your hands already today? Are you confident that you have hygienically cleaned them – removed every piece of dirt and all germs? It has been said that the length of time you need to wash them thoroughly is the same length of time as it takes to sing Happy Birthday! One thing I was proud of when working for Unilever was that it was a company who brought soap to poorer countries and helped to raise the level of hygiene.

It may have come as a shock to hear in today's reading that Jesus' disciples ate food with defiled, unwashed hands? No wonder the Pharisees and teachers of the law criticised them. But could we, like them, be missing the point here? This wasn't a debate all about hygienic cleaning but outward ceremonial washing. Ceremonial washing had become a tradition over the years, taught by the Jewish elders and very much part of Jewish identity. And once they had done so they claimed that they were now right with God and able to worship him. Even the Psalmist said that those with clean hands could stand in God's holy place.

But again – aren't we missing something? Is God really after hand-washing? And can washing our hands ever be enough to make us right with God? We can only be truly forgiven and accepted by God through the death and resurrection of Jesus. But even a public show of confession is not enough if it's hiding lives and attitudes that are far from God and what He desires.

One translation puts Jesus' reply to them as this: You are nothing but show-offs! The prophet Isaiah was right when he wrote that God had said, "All of you praise me with your words, but you never really think about me. It is useless for you to worship me, when you teach rules made up by humans." You disobey God's commands in order to obey what humans have taught. You are good at rejecting God's commands so that you can follow your own teaching.

Jesus wasn't condemning the ritual washing– but for making the ritual more important than what God desires. The important thing is that the important thing is the important thing. So what is the important thing if it's not rituals? It's relationship with God expressed by love for him and for all around us.

I feel like I'm repeating my sermon from a couple of weeks ago where in Philippians 3 Paul, who had been a leading Pharisee now claimed that all his past rituals were worthless in comparison to knowing Jesus and being transformed by him. God longs for us to be in relationship with him and expressing our love for him and for all around us – and that, as we say most weeks – is the most important commandment. While rituals can help us and provide an almost comforting security we need to be aware of the danger that they can also pose, especially when we get obsessed by seeking to practise them perfectly and obscure the values they are pointing towards.

The world around us is looking for integrity – and so is God. Mind, words, actions all united. Walk the talk. During the past week we've been reminded that it's a year on since the awful massacre and the fleeing of the surviving Rohingya refugees. But what has shocked the world even more so has been the apparent inaction of Aung San Suu Kyi – a key leader in Myanmar and a Nobel Peace Prize winner. They, and we, expected so much more from her. How can you be a peace winner and not practice peace on your home territory?

But then how can we call ourselves Christians and be in disagreement with those we worship with?

I liked how one commentator summed up what Jesus was saying here – you need to be examining your own heart and not your neighbours' hands!

It was probably quite a shock to those listening when Jesus went on to say that it's not the food that you put into your mouth that makes you unclean and unfit to worship God but the bad words that come out of your mouth. Food rituals were vitally important for the Jews. For many of us it's so much easier to control what we eat than what we say – but again Jesus was pointing to the values that really matter. It's not what we eat but what we say that matters. What we say comes from what we really are deep within and that's even harder to control.

Our other reading – the letter from James is very practical. He encourages us to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. I'm sure you've heard it said – you've two ears and one mouth and should use them in that proportion! How many times have we regretted what we have said?

We certainly need a make-over from the inside out – but we can only truly do this with the help of God's Spirit.

Perhaps one of our rituals is reading the Bible every day. It's one I practise and would definitely encourage – but I have to keep checking that I am not simply building up my head knowledge. What really counts is when I let those words which I read infiltrate my very life and start to change me – my attitudes, words and actions.

I've probably lost count how many sermons I've listened and been moved by and then have forgotten them even by coffee time and failed to act on them. James says – don't merely listen - do what it says. Walk the talk!

I wonder how many mirrors you have in your home? It was one of the first things I needed to sort out when I moved in – did I have enough mirrors – in the right place – both full length and smaller for make-up. Was it because I'm vain or perhaps it's more important when you live alone as it can be quite embarrassing when you go out and someone points out the smudge of dirt on your face which weren't aware of. But it's even more embarrassing when you've already noticed it and ignored it or just forgotten or been interrupted. That – says James – is just like being challenged by God's word and then ignoring it. Why not instead - just do it – and you'll be blessed!

And what is the true religion that God desires? While we may accept that it's not all about rituals we may be a bit surprised by what James writes – it's to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. In other words to care for those who struggle with caring for themselves and not let ourselves follow what the world is promoting which tends to be ourselves and our possessions. I think it can be summed up in one word – LOVE.

As we start a new term perhaps it's a good time to take stock of what rituals and practises we are pursuing and why? Are they helping or hindering us from developing a meaningful relationship with God and our neighbour? And how important is love?

Perhaps 1 Corinthians 13 could begin with - If I religiously follow every Christian ritual I can find but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I read the Bible every

day and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge but never put it into practise and do not have love, I am nothing.

Father God, forgive us for the times when we just go through the motions. Change us from the inside and help us to live lives of integrity and love that mirror that of Jesus. Amen

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