**Sermon: Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost 29 Aug 2021**

**Song of Songs 2:8-13, Ps 45:1-2, 6-9, James 1:17-27, Mark 7:1-8, 14-23.**

Jesus said to his disciples, it’s not what goes into a person, that is what food is consumed, that defiles a person, but what comes out of their mouth’ (Mark: 71:14). The protest march against the pandemic here in Melbourne and around the country put on full display the ugliness of sloganistic comments and insidious language as a way to show the displeasure of the lockdowns. There is no doubt that the impact of the lockdowns is evident. The mental health of many has been at stake, as well as the social isolation many have experienced, some away from family and friends. The experience for some of us may be more positive, able to use technology to catch up with those we need to and taking a chance to go for a walk with a ‘bubble buddy’ to stay connected. It is fair to say the lockdown is a challenge but what transpired over the weekend sent shockwaves across the media. From some of the vision I viewed, the chants and comments put on show the anger and frustration but also the vitriol in language I would not want children to hear, let alone myself. It is not what goes into a person, not the food we eat, but what comes out of the mouth’.

It was drummed into me from a young age not to swear, there was an uncomfortable punishment for doing so and to be caught was a shameful experience. Swearing it seems has become far more common place in our society as is using the name of Jesus as a swear word. But what Jesus is calling out in our gospel passage today has little to do with swearing. Rather it points to the practice of their faith. Jesus quotes Isaiah, ‘This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines’, (Mk 7:6, 7). This is the very opposite of what I was suggesting in my introduction. Jesus was speaking with insiders, those who were indoctrinated into the Jewish faith, who chose to perform the acts of faith, rather than honestly from their hearts, worship God. The Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem were good at pointing out to Jesus the practices his disciples refrained from, ie ceremonially washing before eating. Mark also lists for us some other traditions that they adhered to including washing food before cooking and eating, washing of cups, pots and bronze kettles. All of these actions were for the purpose of ritual purification. Today we would see these practices as good hygiene, to wash hands, fruit and vegetables and the vessels we use to cook and eat with. But they are not just acts of washing, they have ceremonial actions and prayers that that attend them.

But there is also something else going on in our reading today. The Pharisees and scribes belonged to an elite class in society. They had authority over what occurred in the Temple. Moreover, they also had authority over the enforcement of purity laws and rituals. This was a shame/honour culture. For the disciples not to wash their hands was quite a slap in the face to the status quo held by the Pharisees, chief priests and scribes. Literally, bringing shame to the very religious practices of the day. Essentially, they held control over the Theology of the day, what they believed about God and what God instructed them to do according to the Law. Those who did not follow the ritual purity laws would be considered unclean. In fact, within the culture many groups of people were automatically considered unclean and would not have access to the Temple in Jerusalem at all, let alone be within the city walls.

Jesus and his disciples were making a very big statement by not following the prescribed rules and laws as set out by the religious leaders of the day. Jesus was drawing a line in the sand by making a clear distinction between what the disciples did or did not do, and what the condition of the heart of the person is. On Wednesday, I spoke on Psalm 139 and at the end of this Psalm of David we read these words, ‘Search me O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts’, (Ps 139: 23). Jesus was testing the Pharisees to see where their hearts were while calling them out for insisting on the multitude of purity laws that were difficult to maintain.

Jesus was impressing upon the disciples that what mattered most was their relationship with God, and that relationship was not bound by ritual, but through love of God and love of one’s neighbour. This included what came out of their mouths! In the Epistle of James, he encouraged people to ‘bridle their tongues’ (James 1:26). This idea of what comes out of a person’s mouth speaks to their character. James was encouraging people to be ‘quick to listen, and slow to speak’, and even ‘slow to anger’. It would be easy right now to jump on that bandwagon of criticising and laying blame to one group or another for the way in which the Pandemic is currently handled here in Victoria. What, then is a better way? Prayer! Pray for those who lead us, it is no easy job, pray for those caring for the sick, pray for those who have contracted the Coronavirus, pray for the families who have lost loved ones and dear friends. The protest march of which many of us may have viewed on TV or heard about on radio witnessed the anger and vitriol toward others, the government, the police etc. But what did all that anger and pent up frustration achieve? It is a lesson to us, to consider why Jesus was not upset with the actions of the disciples but rather was more interested in what came out of their mouths.

May we find the courage to pray for those affected by Covid-19, to pray for families and loved ones who have lost a family member or friend. To pray for our doctors and nurses, for those front line workers who day after day are doing the most incredible work on our behalf. May we be thankful for the hard work of all who have isolated and continue to do their best so that we may soon return to some semblance of normality. May our words, thoughts and actions be pleasing to God and to one another.

Amen.