

Sermon Aug 29th 2021

In our current context it may be important to note that Jesus does not condemn ritual handwashing !

In this difficult passage Mark invites us into an ancient conversation about handwashing and food, a conversation set within a religious system that was complex and included many sects and perspectives and 2 topics that we can relate to powerfully after 2 years of strict handwashing and no shared chalice.

Travel back 2000 years and the Pharisees' are curious about the eating practices of the disciples; a group who were living and eating in community in ways contrary to the norm – perhaps a bit like a 'commune' (or the Extinction rebellion Campsite on Blackheath) – the disciples are relying on the kindness of strangers sporting filthy feet and grubby hands and breaking bread with "outcasts" after long days on the road, in adversity and excitement new ways of being are evolving for them.....

And Jesus was having to find ways of interpreting Jewish tradition within this motley group and explain and share those traditions with his predominantly-Gentile audience. In doing so he offers a new twist on the old, suggesting that what defiles is not what goes into the body, but what comes from the **heart**.

And of course new rules/ ways of being emerge that define community some involve food, music, the arts and so much more because

We are defined by what we make central to our community, by what rules and precepts, lie at the heart of it, throughout the gospels Jesus is redefining what that might look and feel like?

"We shall be known by the company we keep," the song from MaMuse reminds us.

Jesus frequently engaged in very public conversations about purity and its relationship to morality, religious meaning. – covid ref -What does it mean for us to continue certain traditions and to engage in public conversation both within

our communities as well as in the public square, holding our own religious tradition to more accountability and more justice?

I was recently invited to join a group of concerned Christians who felt that the current direction in politics was so far from their understanding of what it means to be Christian that they felt compelled to come together to present counter arguments from a Christian perspective to challenge the prevailing narrative - is this something we are prepared to do together here in Chaldon?

Are we prepared to examine and try out new ways of being in community that may not play by the rules of the prevailing priorities? It can be really hard to do this when no one else shares your values and beliefs, it is exhausting and I'm sure there were evenings where Jesus sat down with the disciples glad to be away from the constant confrontations with the prevailing culture – a culture born for good reasons in exile, just as our covid rules are borne out of pandemic.

Jesus would have been brought up with a strong sense of the rabbinical custom of midrash of engaging with texts and customs to see if they were relevant in the current context to explore what their sacred texts and traditions meant in their current setting - for Jews in 1st century Israel it was the oppression of Roman occupation. For their ancestors it had been exile and bondage in Egypt

So how do we understand our traditions and stories handed down to us in the context of a post industrial capitalist society?

These sorts of discussions were among the many gifts given to us by the gospels

As with purity laws, with all ethical frameworks, we make calculated choices about how we use and apply them. We see this played out in our own church over same sex marriage, we see it in wider society in arguments about trans rights.

Of course we prefer easy binaries – life is easier to understand and navigate that way...many of our newspapers and politicians play into this easy binary and it is dangerous and polarised but Jesus was a binary buster, not one for simple answers – he answers with further questions, riddles, stories, questions...

Today we hear him say 'it is from the human heart that evil intention comes'

Throughout history Binaries of all types including who and what is pure and impure have been co opted, deployed and weaponized to manipulate communities and to commandeer power.

But Jesus in his ministry messes with the binaries and redefines belonging. He engages with complex cultural issues and challenges the colonizing economic, theological, and political ideologies that profited from maintaining clear lines between sacred and secular, pure and impure, Gentile and Jew, male and female.

How do we as church avoid entrenching legacies of previous generations and make sure we honour and centre the space between and beyond the binaries as well as honouring the intentions of good rules such as we have seen with Covid.

After all, Jesus was **The Great Binary Buster**, how do **we** step into that place today? *consider*

Nongendered bathrooms

Refugees - the language we use

Travelling communities

How do we stay with the trouble that this creates and look after ourselves as we do so, how do we decide which laws to keep and which to jettison/ignore?

What makes for purity in this day and age?

Will we prioritize tradition or relationship?

Heart centredness or entrenched rules?

What do our choices about who is invited, included, listened to say about who is of worth?

Who do we choose to keep safe and who do we cast aside in favour of our treasured religious, economic, or cultural laws?

What do Jesus words mean for the evacuation of Afghanistan

For the investors in fossil fuels

For those who prioritise GDP over human rights?

“We shall be known by the company we keep,” the song from MaMuse reminds us.

Company is of course most visible around a shared table, next week we will celebrate eucharist indoors for the first time in over 12 months – how we do that will define how we go forward as a community, the decisions we make as a church community will define to others what we prioritise.

The simple act of eating in community can be revolutionary. It is one of the ways that cultures ritually repair damaged relationships, connect with ancestors, solidify commitment, and offer blessing. How we have responded here in Chaldon to the Covid pandemic has defined us, how we have adapted has energised and changed us and this conversation needs to remain ‘live’ for us to remain authentic to Jesus heart centred message.

Those of us who regularly have access to ‘Table’, to food, and to safe spaces of belonging and sanctuary do well to remember that these are sites of struggle, power, and often exclusion. One only needs to think back to those school mealtimes of wondering or worrying about whether there would be a place for us, or powerfully wielding or withholding access to those shared tables. Cliques and unwritten rules about who belongs and who can eat are not limited to school lunchrooms. Boundaries can be come very harmful when they are entrenched and unexamined so that setting strict unerring boundaries is a violent act...
Immigration laws

The Table is a place of power.

Can we like Jesus be alert to who is present and who is absent, constantly looking for ways to build bigger tables.

So let us always remember that Jesus challenges the rules around him, he tests them against a clear imperative to love – is this rule coming from a place of love - wearing a mask, keeping a distance or is it a rule that has been weaponised to subjugate those who are on the ‘wrong side of it’ –

Those with no access to public funds

Those without the right paperwork at Kabul airport

Those who don't conform to our traditional view of gender?

As we navigate difficult times can we keep open hearts and minds about the rules both big and little that govern our lives and consider them in the light of Jesus' teaching, noting whether our decisions and behaviour are grounded in love for all creation and are enabling not disabling those who wish to join in kingdom building.

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