



Reflection by Hillarie Griggs

Fourteenth Sunday After Trinity
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
1st September 2024

This Sunday's Gospel tells us about a public disagreement between the Pharisees and Jesus but as you read it keep in mind that Mark is helping us understand what it means to follow Jesus and what it doesn't mean. He is explaining that following Jesus, being a Christian, is not about keeping a bunch of religious rituals. It is about having a relationship with God. To help us understand this he decides to tell us about an encounter Jesus had with the Pharisees regarding hand washing.

The Pharisees were deeply religious, everything they did was all about obeying God. They were convinced that their rules and regulations were pleasing to and required by God. It was through the keeping of these traditions that they could show their love of God. They thought that if you violated any one of these religious traditions you were sinning. The trouble was they became overly concerned with what other people were doing or not doing! They thought their way was the only way which led to them becoming judgemental and they began to force their views and standards onto other people.

I think we would all agree, for hygiene reasons, it is advisable to wash our hands before eating. The trouble with the Pharisees was that it wasn't about the need to wash hands but the way that the hands were washed. The way that hand washing was done had become more important than the fact that hands were washed! They had come to believe that a person who washed their hands in the way prescribed by them was righteous and the person who didn't was sinful and immoral. The problem was that they focused on the external rituals rather than the heart. They also arrogantly believed that because they carefully observed these external rituals they were righteous and did not need saving.

There is nothing wrong with having rituals and traditions. Rituals themselves are not bad. They can be a way of helping people move from ordinary life into a sacred frame of mind and they encourage a deepening spiritual insight. Traditions can also be generally helpful and they have developed from good intentions. They can help build a sense of belonging within a community. The danger occurs when rituals and traditions become more important than our relationship and worship of God. They become unhelpful when you start to evaluate and judge other people based purely on your own religious traditions. If we just focus on the externals, if religious ritual and traditions become the focal point of our worship, then our worship of God is in danger of becoming empty and shallow. It is what is in our hearts as we worship God that is important not the traditions we use. Our worship and obedience need to flow from our gratitude and love for Him.

It is a reminder to us that it is possible to have lives that are characterised by outward forms of godliness, like the Pharisees in our reading, but to have hearts that are far from God. We can very easily find ourselves in the trap of maintaining a commitment to religious traditions and yet neglect any true love for God, His Word or our neighbour.

The key point is that God wants a personal relationship with His people. Those who have that will do what is right because they love Him and want to, not because of a set of rules and regulations that need to be followed. Rituals and tradition are not a substitute for love.