

29/08/2021 Mark 7:1-8,14,15,21-23 Pastor Fraser Pearce

I'll start this sermon by talking about two situations that you've probably experienced, and that can be helpful in understanding today's reading.

Have you ever been at the door of *someone else's* home, or room, And been invited in, but hesitated to go in Because the home or the room is pristine, But you are not clean: you can imagine leaving marks on the carpet. Or on the furniture...

It's not so much that you'd feel guilty about going in, It's that part of you doesn't want to spoil what's pure, To dirty what's clean.

It's not necessarily a common experience, but it does happen.

OK, this next experience seems to me to be more common:

Someone is at the door of *your* home, or room, or shed, And you know they'd like to come in, but you don't invite them in, Because your place is a mess...

It's not that you necessarily feel *guilty* about the state of your house Or your room or your shed, It's that you're *ashamed* of it: you'd like to clean things up first.

If you can tune into real human experiences like this

Then you can tune into today's text,

Because at the heart of today's text is the importance of *purity*:

The importance of purity when it comes to our life with God:

The importance of purity when it comes to us entering into God's presence, And the importance of purity when it comes to God entering into our lives.

On the one hand Jesus' teaching gives us some very bad news,

And that is the problem of purity when it comes to God

Is much worse than we think:

We cannot deal with what really defiles us with sanitizer or masks:

No simply outward bodily action will save us.

On the other hand the fact that it is *Jesus* who gives us this teaching

Is reason for great hope: he is the one who gave his life to purify us
So that we may come into God's presence with a good conscience
And with joy.

He is the one who comes into our lives not to shame us
Because of the filth that we naturally generate from inside.
He comes to cleanse us from all that defiles
So that we can live at peace with God and each other.

The issue of purity *is* at the heart of today's reading,
Listen to these words:

[The Pharisees and some of the scribes from Jerusalem] noticed that some of [Jesus'] disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. Mark 7:2

'Defiled hands': that word 'defiled' we don't use much
In modern spoken English: what's going on?
Well a dictionary definition will tell you that to *defile*
Is to damage or mar or spoil something that is pure,
Or that it is to desecrate or profane something that is sacred or holy,
Or that it is to sexually assault or rape.

OK, let's start with that last definition.

Let's say someone is sexually assaulted: they did nothing wrong:
They suffered this dreadful sort of violence.

Because we lack words in our modern vocabulary
Such a person might say that they feel guilty.

But it would be far more real for them to say that they feel *defiled*:
Made unclean, spoiled, marred.

[It seems to me we can have the same sort of feeling if our home is robbed:
It's not just that we suffer loss, it's that the place can feel *unclean*...]

Well in our life with God it's not just that there can be guilt
That can make us fear God,
There can also be uncleanness, defilement, that can make us ashamed
To come into God's presence,
Or to welcome God's presence into our lives.

The Pharisees and Scribes were critical of Jesus' disciples, his students,
And by extension Jesus himself,
Because, in their own tradition, *but not on the basis of God's word*,

They thought Jesus disciples did not make themselves ritually pure
Before they ate.

It wasn't that the Pharisees and Scribes were concerned about
What we would call physical hygiene:

After all, we know it's good to wash our hands before we eat.

They thought Jesus' disciples were failing to act in a way

That would make them fit to live cleanly with God,

That they were marring or spoiling God's purity and holiness.

Jesus responds to the Pharisees' and Scribes' question

With a forthright denunciation,

And with evident sarcasm, and what we might call snark:

Jesus was and is good, but not nice,

And he treated those in authority seriously

By seriously holding them to account, even with evident sarcasm.

We won't look at that part of the reading today,

But we'll skip ahead to how Jesus uses the situation

As a teaching opportunity; listen to the text: **Then [Jesus] called the crowd again and said to them, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.'**

Note that Jesus is speaking to the crowds here:

To those who are following him, but who are not yet called to discipleship.

He is beginning to challenge their understanding,

The understanding that had been promoted by the Pharisees and Scribes,

Concerning what really makes a person clean or unclean before God.

Now in Matthew, Mark, and Luke we know that Jesus teaches the crowds
Only in parables, but that he explains things in private to his disciples.

So, for example, earlier in Mark's Gospel, with the Parable of the Sower,

it says this: **With many such parables [Jesus] spoke the word to [the crowds], as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.** Mark 4:33-34

Well, we might think that today's reading is an exception,

Especially as we heard it from the lectern,

Where some of the verses are skipped,

But listen to how the text goes on: **When [Jesus] had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable.**

Obviously the word 'parable' has a broader meaning that we're used to. In fact in the Gospels a parable can be a story like the Good Samaritan, But a parable can also be a physical object, like a fig tree, Or a condensed saying that need unpacking, that has a spiritual depth, Like in today's reading.

So this is how Jesus teaches his disciples, teaches us, This is his 'in house' teaching: **'Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?'** (Thus he declared all foods clean.)

Jesus makes it clear that nothing that comes into our bodies Can make us unclean, unfit, to come into God's presence. This, of course, will have big implications for the disciples As they go one to proclaim the word to the gentiles..

But then he goes on in a way that can only make us very uneasy: **'It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from *within*, from *the human heart*, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.'**

If you have a look at the printed text you'll see that there's a colon After the words **For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come:** [colon!]

That's about right, it seems to me. Jesus is about to list the evil thoughts That bubble up from our hearts, from deep within us In ways we can't understand.

OK, let's hear the list again, understanding that our thoughts about these things Defile us, they make us unfit to come into God's presence

They make us ashamed to welcome God into our lives:

Fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly.

Can we deal with this sort of filth by cleaning our hands?

Or by any merely outward washing that we can do?

Let's just take one aspect of the list for today: the word 'envy'.

Literally it's the evil eye.

We can get some idea of the attitude that Jesus is speaking about

From the parable of the workers in the vineyard:
Do you remember about the workers who laboured all day,
But who get paid the same as those who worked for less than an hour?
Do you remember how they felt?
And do you remember what the owner of the vineyard says?
This is what he says: **Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"** Matthew 20
Do you wish evil upon me because I am good to the undeserving?
This resentment at God's goodness to others
Especially when we think they don't deserve it, lurks in our hearts,
And it defiles us, it makes us unclean before God.

The question here is not even whether we are guilty of sin,
Although that is an important reality we also need to deal with.
No, here we are dealing with a different category,
And a different reality of human existence in relation to God.
We are by nature *unclean*: evil thoughts and intentions well up from within,
And spill out into our word and deeds,
Making us too dirty to come into God's presence,
And ashamed to welcome God into our lives.

If the Gospel stopped at this point we would have very bad news:
It would be a spiritual diagnosis that is far worse than we could anticipate,
With no hope for a cure.
And it seems to me that it's good for us to pause here.
To recognise the reality of our lives in relation to God.
To admit our solidarity with our first parents, and with the whole of humanity.

But it is also good for us to move our attention
From the words that Jesus speaks, *to the person who he is*.

Jesus, who spoke these fearful diagnostic words to his disciples, to us,
Is the one who went to the cross to deal once and for all with our sin.
His shed blood has the power to wash us clean
So that we both may come into God's presence with a true heart:
With a heart that admits the truth about our great need,
And so that we may welcome Christ into our lives
As one who comes not to shame us about the filth within us

But to clean us up, and to make us fit for life with God.

The hymn 'Rock of Ages' captures well

The fact that Jesus covers our shame, that he cleans us from all that defiles:

***Nothing in my hands I bring
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress;
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly,
Wash me, Saviour, or I die.***

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Today we came into the presence of God

As we receive the body and blood of our Lord.

We come as people who have been washed in the waters of baptism,

And who share in the cleanness of Christ.

We have received together the cleansing word of the forgiveness of sins,

That gives us the confidence to come forward and to receive

The body and blood of Christ,

The body and the blood

Of the one who can make us strong in body and soul to life eternal.

May God keep us steadfast in his word,

So that we find our purity in Christ alone,

And so that we experience to joy of seeing our Lord

Face to face.

In Jesus' name. Amen.