

Sermon for 2 Sept 2012, 22 Sunday of Ordinary Time.

*It's what's on the inside that counts.*

The Rev'd Tony Surman

Song of Songs 2:8-13; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23.

The topic of cleanness and uncleanness, or purity and impurity that Jesus addresses in today's Gospel is mentioned a great deal in the Scriptures that our Lord would have been familiar with. It features particularly prominently in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, two of the five books that are described in Judaism together as the Torah (teaching or law), or as the Pentateuch ('five volumes'). They sit at the front end of our Bible, and they make for interesting and sometimes startling reading.

In Leviticus and Deuteronomy – and scattered throughout the Old Testament (OT) – God's people were given detailed instructions about what is clean and unclean, what makes someone unclean, and how they might go about restoring themselves to a state of cleanness. Contact with blood, body fluids, and dead bodies rendered people ritually unclean for varying amounts of time, during which they were isolated, one way or another, from the community. In the light of modern health concerns, a lot of it makes good sense, but some of the practices would strike us today as more superstitious than scientific.

Take the impurity that a woman was understood to enter into after childbirth. The logic of the uncleanness followed from the very visceral nature of birth, and the period of time following birth during which a mother was deemed to be unclean – and unapproachable by her husband – was probably a benefit to her [that is how I've heard this characterised by an orthodox Jewish woman]. What is a little bizarre to the modern or post-modern mind is the way that this period of uncleanness differed depending on whether the mother had given birth to a boy or a girl – 40 days for a boy, 80 days for girl...

In OT times, God's people had a multitude of observances to respect if they wished to remain pure and maintain a good relationship with God. It was a nightmare, I suppose, for scrupulous individuals. We might wonder what caused the religion to develop in that direction. We might suspect that particular social-political forces were behind it - one can imagine that a priestly cast of people (who were most likely the writers of the codes in Leviticus and Deuteronomy) had a strong interest in promoting an approach to life that encouraged the use of their cleansing, sacrificial services. Be that as it may, the overt theological

rationale for strict observance of purity, was that it honoured God who was purity itself [Ex 19:6, Numbers 15:40, Deut 14:21].

This leads us to another important OT insight regarding purity that can be easily overlooked, namely the conviction that purity was *not just* about external observances, but about the disposition of one's heart. Many voices in the Old Testament recognised that the Holy One could only truly be honoured by those whose hearts were in right place. Here is just one instance from the Psalms:

*The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise (Psalm 51:17).*

The OT – and this is really true of the Prophets too - *differs* from Jesus in that it never really divorces observance of the external laws from the need to have one's heart fully committed to God. In the OT, they go hand in hand; they are inseparable, in much the same way as James in the New Testament (NT) would see no division possible between faith and works.

Jesus, as we see in today's Gospel makes purity a matter of the heart, or human intention alone.

“There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

That teaching must have left many of his admirers stunned and scandalised; the commandments they observed gave them a strong sense of identity, connecting them to their past as a people of God, and were no doubt invested with all sorts of spiritual meaning for them. Nevertheless Jesus, as an extraordinary *change-agent* in this piece, gives no concession to personal or communal comfort on this matter. Too much was obviously at stake.

St Paul developed Jesus' radical idea about purity. In his most complicated letter, to the Romans, Paul argues that “nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.” (Rom 14:14b).

Many people today would be happy to stretch Paul's argument about Christian liberty in external matters to relationships between partners of any sex, and agree with Paul that if a person's own conscience did not condemn them in their particular human relationships, their relationship with God is as robust as ever – provided that their liberty in the matter did not cause weaker consciences scandal. Intriguingly, the Paul of history is unlikely to have agreed with this extension of his line of reasoning on liberty. I believe this is the case because the first chapter of the very same book demonstrates Paul's understandable

prejudice against same-sex relationships. When I say understandable, I mean, *comprehensible* in light of his upbringing, in which sex itself was viewed primarily in procreative terms, always involved an element of uncleanness (rendering husband and wife impure), and in which heterosexual marriage was the primary metaphor for understanding the relationship between God and God's people (God was the bridegroom, Israel was the bride). In the opening chapter of Romans Paul characterises humanity's flight from God in terms of a process that begins with denial of God's sovereignty and progresses to self-indulgence and depravity that he exemplifies as the committing of acts we would describe as homosexual (Rom 1:20ff). I think that Paul is essentially correct when he outlines the general pattern that follows rejection of God, but the fact that he chooses to exemplify human depravity in the terms he does probably indicates that he was as inconsistent as the next person honouring the principle of liberty that he associated with life in Christ.

Like Paul, I was raised in a religious culture that places a great deal of emphasis on the procreative purpose of marriage, and, similarly, views heterosexual marriage as a metaphor for the covenant between Christ and his Church. In fact, the religious culture in which I was formed, sides with Paul and Jesus in presenting celibacy – committed abstinence from sex – as perhaps the most blessed state for a Christian to be in. It is to be expected then that I, like Paul, should have a natural unease about sex in general, let alone the stuff that stretches biblical norms.

Well, I've had the good pleasure to be a member of the Anglican church for some ten years, and over that time, I've had plenty of opportunities to be scandalised by the liberties we sometimes take with our religion. Often I've found that my head is prepared to accept new ways of being Christian long before my gut is, but when I've persevered I've usually come to a state where head and heart agree.

What I have seen of committed, monogamous Christian, gay relationships since becoming an Anglican has challenged my prejudices and caused me to approach the matter of same-sex relationships with the same logic that Paul used to justify Christian liberty, and that Jesus espoused when he declared that the intentions of the heart are the only arbiter of purity. When those intentions are aligned with loving God with all one's heart, soul, strength and mind (Luke 10:27), and treating others as we would have them treat us, the relationships that result will, by this logic, be good and blessed by God, and, by extension, ought to be blessed by Christ's church in Jesus' Name.

I hasten to add that there are often *less worthy* intentions behind human relationships. That is why St Paul's apparently bigoted rant in Romans 1 should

not be casually dismissed. If we place his supposed prejudice against homosexuality to one side, what he is charting is the path of human rebellion against God. It is a process that begins in denial of God or at least God's power, proceeds through the worship of material things, and selfishness and culminates in behaviour that for *most* people – I think it is fair to say - is indicative of personal thrill-seeking, and not an expression of their unique creature-hood in relation to God.

I've spent a lot of time banging on about an epistle we didn't hear this morning. My apologies for that, but it is closely related to the Gospel theme, and pondering it does help us to feel about as scandalised as the Jesus' fellow Jews would have felt when he told them that "there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."

The epistle that we did hear, by James, should not escape our attention though. The author of that letter is traditionally taken to be Jesus' brother. I believe there is a continuity of thought expressed in this letter and Jesus' often very down to earth teaching. The continuity between Jesus and James is particularly evident when James sums up the cleanliness that we are called to before God: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." In the Gospel we heard about the negative things that come from a heart turned away from God. The little quote I've given from James highlights a very positive thing that comes from a heart *turned towards* God – relief of suffering of those people who are most vulnerable in society.

Friends, if the concern of our hearts is fundamentally for the good of others, the building up of our community in love, and the shunning of everything opposed to that, then our lives *are* pure. We can claim no credit for this. The ability to choose well is a gift of grace itself. This grace though, if accepted and responded to, leads to lives which are conformed more and more closely to the most giving person of all, Jesus Christ. The shape of those lives will no doubt be surprising to many – just as Jesus' life was a scandal – but the proof of godliness will inevitably be revealed, to the benefit of all and the glory of God.