

TRADITION AND PURITY

Pentecost 11 Year A

Gn. 45:1-15; Ps. 133; Rom. 11:1-2a, 29-32; Mt. 15:1-20

Gladstone 16/08/2020

No matter how hard you try to fight it, like it or not, every one of us is influenced by tradition. Anyone who has ever seen the musical, *Fiddler on the Roof* will understand what I'm talking about here. From the moment you were born, until you pass from this life, your thoughts, actions and attitudes are, in some way, influenced by your ancestors and the culture in which you have been raised. The English novelist, G.K. Chesterton, once wrote,

Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead.

Are we to be grateful for this inheritance or is it something that we spend our lives trying to rise above?

When we look at the practice of the church, we find that it's accentuated by its forms of tradition. There is the Orthodox tradition, the Roman Catholic tradition, the Anglican tradition, the Baptist tradition, the Lutheran tradition, the Pentecostal tradition, etc. etc. and of course, the tradition of the Uniting Church—short though its historical years may be in contrast to some of the others I've just mentioned. But even there the Uniting Church traditions have been, to some extent, passed on to us from its foundational denominations—mainly Presbyterian and Methodist.

Tradition, in the church, has often been the subject of heated debate. In some churches this conflict shows itself in the eternal controversy over whether we should sing hymns or choruses—or indeed both. In others, it's characterised in the way we organise and administer authority in the church. For yet others, tradition becomes the fighting ground for the struggle over doctrinal interpretation and practice. Invariably, people on both sides of the debate claim biblical authority for their position.

In all of these ways, tradition influences the way we worship and the way in which we practice our Christian faith. It's in its relationship to holiness, however, that tradition can often be the source of restriction, rather than freedom.

How then, should we regard tradition, or indeed, the threat to tradition, as it arises within the church? And on this basis, how are we to determine the things that are appropriate for our worship of God and for holy living? The passage before us, in Matthew chapter 15, is framed by the question from the Pharisees in verse 2, regarding the washing of hands before eating and the answer that Jesus gives to this question in verse 20.

Within the bounds of these two verses, Jesus outlines the criteria by which authentic worship and holy living is determined.

For the Pharisees, the question concerning hand washing was not a matter of hygiene (as it is for us today, especially with the threat of COVID-19) but of ritual purity. The distinction between what was regarded as being ritually clean and what was unclean, was a matter of maintaining the holiness to which the people of God were called. Purity is essential for holiness. The holiness of the people, maintained by remaining ritually pure, was to be a parallel of the holiness of God.

The Pharisees, in putting their question to Jesus, were confronting him in this area of holiness. But, as Jesus points out, *ritual* hand washing before eating, was a matter of human tradition and was not something that had been commanded by God in the Jewish Scriptures—the Torah.

In this way, Jesus highlights the first truth that we will be looking at this morning, and that is, that human tradition, in and of itself, is not the mark of authentic worship, or religious holiness.

He highlights this by taking an example of their tradition that caused others to break the Law. The sixth Commandment stated, “Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.” The implication here is not just about children obeying their parents but that children were to financially support their parents, particularly in their aging years as there were no pensions or social security benefits to be had. However, a particular tradition of the Pharisees stated that, if you had pledged your income to God—and, of course, a pledge could not be broken—you did not have to support your parents. Here, then, is an obvious conflict.

On the one hand, you have the Pharisees condemning Jesus for acting in a way that, according to them, made him ritually unclean, and on the other hand, you have the Pharisees also breaking the Law for the sake of tradition. Jesus uses this example to show them that their actions underlie a deeper spiritual problem—that of hypocrisy. They exemplified outward worship but were inwardly impure themselves. In this respect, the Pharisees were guilty of the very charge that they brought against Jesus.

In the church, today, it’s often difficult to determine that which is tradition, because that’s the way we’ve always done it, or that which profitable for Christian growth and maturity. Does our tradition free us or does it bind us? Do we understand what we do and why we do it? These are all questions that we need to continually ask ourselves. Do we uphold certain traditional beliefs and practices that contradict the gospel of grace, given to us through Jesus Christ? Or, are there some things that we must rigidly hold on to at all cost? In an effort to understand these questions, we need to look more closely at the criteria for Christian holiness, as it’s revealed in the words of Jesus.

So, let's be more explicit. What is it that defiles a person? Is purity found in the keeping of external trappings of tradition and ceremony, or is there something deeper at stake here? Jesus states quite clearly that it's not what goes into a person that defiles them but what comes out.

In other words, inner purity, not external ceremony, is what matters.

Well might the Pharisee take offence at the Jesus' words, because, after all, he was publicly humiliating them. He had shown up their insincerity and their hypocrisy. And not only the Pharisees would have been taken a little aback, because defilement was always understood by Jews to affect a person from an external source. Defilement always resulted from coming in contact with something that was considered unclean—transferring its uncleanness to the person. Jesus' statement, therefore, cut right across this traditional Jewish belief displaying a deeper understanding of the nature of purity and defilement.

In a fairly vulgar way, Jesus describes what happens to that which goes into a person's body through the mouth. Natural bodily functions take over and the body is cleansed through these natural processes (I don't think you need me to explain in detail just how that happens). But it's not these external things, going into the mouth, that make a person unclean. The things that you eat or touch are purely physical and have no intrinsic value in terms of religious impurity. Eating with dirty hands may have some health risks attached to it but not in regard to religious impurity. What matters are those things that come out of the mouth—the words we use and subsequently, the actions that we perform. But it's not so much the words and actions themselves, that defile a person, they only reveal defilement that already exists—inside.

Jesus is not saying, here, that the Law is nullified or that a person should no longer keep tradition. What he *is* saying is that there is a higher priority—the priority of the inner commitments of the heart. These inner commitments of the heart are then expressed in our words and actions. Our words and actions betray the attitude of our heart. And it's the condition of our heart that determines our state of religious purity or defilement—not what we put into our mouths.

The Pharisees prided themselves on their tradition and outward actions. On the one hand they maintained ritual purity according to the time honoured traditions of their ancestors. Yet in other areas, as Jesus pointed out, they kept their traditions at the expense of God's Law—at the expense of compassion for their fellow Israelites. Thus, their actions displayed their inner impurity. Because of their blindness to this, they led others into sin and defilement.

There are many pious people, today, who boast in their traditional beliefs and in their ritualistic actions, yet hypocrisy resides inside their hearts. Their words and actions, that are contrary to the Law of the gospel of grace, give evidence of their impurity.

What, then, is the place of tradition—in our belief, our worship and in our actions as Christians. As I have already mentioned, Jesus was not speaking out against tradition, *pe se*, but only tradition that goes against the Will and purposes of God. Or if you like—If you hold to a tradition that contravenes the law of grace as revealed in Jesus Christ, it needs to go.

In answering the question, put to him by the Pharisees, Jesus declares that human tradition is not the source of religious purity. Ritual cleansing of the hands cannot remove the impurity that exists within the heart of humankind. That needs a far more serious operation. Unfortunately for the majority of the Pharisees, their hypocrisy blinded them to this truth.

Christians are called to be a “royal priesthood” and “a holy nation”. Maybe there are some things in your life that violate this? Do you have any closely held traditions or preconceptions that need to be re-evaluated in the light of Jesus’ teaching? Do your actions declare the state of your heart?

Every religious community, including Christian religious communities, need tradition. Ok? We’re not arguing that all tradition is bad. Tradition is an important vehicle for mediating and interpreting the Word of God. So, in this sense, the Word of God is not uncontaminated by tradition. The trouble is, that this treasure of the gospel that we hold in our tradition, is always held in clay pots that are easily broken. It’s real treasure in real clay pots. The apostle Paul, in 2 Cor. 4:7 states, “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” This means that whatever our tradition, it can never fully capture the enormity of the whole gospel. Any tradition made by human hands, while it may be useful, will be less than adequate to display the riches of God’s grace. And that’s how it should be, for God is always bigger than our tradition.

It was through tradition that the early church heard the Word of God in a fresh and definitive way. The church in every generation needs to continue to listen for that freshness and relevance, but not as an alternative to tradition. The point is, we should not be focussing on the human tradition but on the Word of God that comes through it and transcends it. It is the Word of the gospel, the good news of salvation, through the grace of God, revealed in Jesus Christ.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and praise. Amen.