

SERMON ON THE FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST -

29 AUGUST 2021

COLLECT FOR THE DAY:

O God of eternal light,
your word is truth:
make us quick to listen and slow to speak
that the word implanted in us will take
root to nourish all we say and do;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the
Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

PRINCIPAL READINGS

Song of Solomon 2: 8-13
Psalm 45: 1-2, 6-9
James 1: 17-27
Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Let us pray:

Psalm 141 vs 3-4

“Set a guard over my mouth, Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips. Do not let my heart be drawn to what is evil so that I take part in wicked deeds along with those who are evildoers; do not let me eat their delicacies, Amen.”

In the gospel according to St Mark that was read earlier, we learn about one of the many challenges that the Pharisees posed to Jesus, this time relating to what they deemed to be disloyalty to the Jewish tradition and custom. They questioned Jesus on the non-adherence of his disciples to the long-standing ritual of the washing of hands before they ate. According to the Pharisees, by not washing their hands, Jesus’ disciples were eating with defiled hands.

The ritual of washing hands before a meal in the Jewish culture is known as “netilat yadayim” which literally means lifting up of the hands. The common practice in carrying out the ritual is the use of a two-handled cup, pouring the water twice on the right hand followed by twice on the left. Where one is left-handed, is it done in reverse. It is expected that the ritual is carried out even if one’s hands are clean, thus casting some doubts as to whether the tradition relates to personal hygiene. Be that as it may, it is a ritual which was passed on from their elders, that the Pharisees were adamant needed to be observed by the disciples of Jesus.

Honest as it sounded, the question posed by the Pharisees was part of a calculated scheme to build up conflict between Jesus and the Jewish religious authorities. They waited eagerly for Jesus' response which they anticipated would be disrespectful to the Jewish religion and therefore spark the conflict with the religious authorities, which would lead to him being charged and brought to the Sanhedrin. Ironically, one could argue that the question came from defiled hearts and had cruel intentions.

As Rev Darrol would say, let us park this for a moment before we get to Jesus' response.

The practice of washing hands is also observed by our priests when celebrating the eucharist. During this altar preparation rite, we see the presiding priest having water poured onto their fingers, after which they dry their hands with a clean cloth. As a Transitional Deacon I have not gone through that part of training yet; but this is one of the significant elements in the celebration of the eucharist. It is a simple gesture but one that has a significant spiritual meaning. Here, the priest says a prayer (which is usually inaudible) that I find to be quite profound - "Lord, wash my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin." This ritual is aimed at reminding the presiding priest that they are called to live purely and devoutly, avoiding all sin. Equally, it is an admission from the priest that they are human and therefore prone to sin in thought, word and deed, hence they bring themselves in supplication to God and ask for the washing of iniquities and cleansing of sin before they administer this most important sacrament in our liturgy.

As a young girl growing up in Idutywa, I also observed another ritual of washing of hands, and this was done before a meal. A woman married to our family would take a bowl with warm water to our grandfather who was the "head of the family" for him to wash his hands before food was brought to him. Similar to what the servers do for priests, the woman would take along a towel hung over one of her arms for our grandfather to dry his hands. What struck me in this tradition was how the woman would have to go on her knees as they approached the head of the family with the bowl, such that they were not at the same level with him, nor did they stand elevated above him. They had to be at a lower position than him as they brought the bowl of water and even when they brought the actual meal thereafter.

Contrary to the supplication to God by the presiding priest when water is brought to them to wash their hands before celebrating the eucharist, in my grandfather's household, the ritual had a different interpretation altogether. Here, the superiority status of the male "head of the family" was entrenched and the woman's role in the household was to serve. These male and female distinct roles

and how they were played out were observed by us, the boy and girl children growing up in these environments. Having grown up observing such expression of inequality among men and women, it is no wonder that when women object to the perpetuation of the status quo, some men find it difficult to cope and resort to violence. It may not be as simplistic, but I am convinced that part of the problem of the heinous acts of violence against women that we witness in our communities today are partly because of these entrenched traditions that display gender inequality. One cannot fathom what goes in the mind of a person, which would lead them to disemboweling a human being as we learnt happened in the past couple of weeks in East London (my hometown). The traditional customs and rituals therefore, essential as one may argue for them to be, need to be scrutinized and challenged, as Jesus did to the Pharisees.

Back to the question by the Pharisees, we learn of Jesus' response where he argues in verse 15 that "nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them"; and that "rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them". In his response, Jesus disputed the traditional error from the Pharisees and explained that food in itself does not make a person unclean. He challenged the purity laws presented by the Pharisees, forcing them to think deeply about what really is important. Jesus argued that it is the intent of the heart that matters to God. He condemned traditions that seemed to have an effect of undoing the original intent of God's commands - namely, those of loving God with all your heart, mind and soul and of loving one's neighbour as oneself. Jesus saw through the intention of these traditions, which were to keep the "pure" Jewish people from mingling with the "outcasts", the Gentiles.

Remember Peter's vision before he left Joppa to go and meet with Cornelius, the centurion at Caesarea. We read in the book of Acts chapter 10 about Peter falling asleep while waiting for something to eat and then having a vision of a sheet being let down from heaven with all sorts of what he considered to be unclean animals. In the vision, we learn that Peter heard a voice three times commanding him to kill and eat the unclean animals. Peter, having been raised in the Jewish tradition, was unwilling to defile himself and eat anything that was impure and unclean. It is the Spirit in his vision that told Peter not to consider unclean what God had made clean. We know that after this dream, Peter met with Cornelius and we also know that at this meeting, the Spirit came on all who were present and heard Peter speak, including the Gentiles. In essence, we should guard against allowing traditions, rituals and symbols from being the deterrent or barrier from communicating God's mission and from bringing God to people.

I remember vividly how overwhelmed and intimidated I was at my very first attendance of an Anglican Church service. Coming from a Methodist Church background, I was completely lost and clueless of what was happening, and I thank God for the young woman who shared her prayerbook with me and guided me as the service continued. What made it even more difficult for me was that as we entered the church building, my husband was taken away and seated at the “men’s” seating section of the church. It was tradition for the seating arrangement to be determined in terms of gender and therefore I was separated from the man I came to church with. In the house of God, we were not permitted to sit alongside. The next Sunday I rebelled and demanded that we sat together, thus challenging the status quo of the time! Should I dare say that my disruption was not welcomed but I had to make a point - that as far as I was concerned, in the eyes of God our seating arrangement in church was insignificant.

The teaching from Jesus today is that we should guard our hearts and keep them clean for that is from where the essence of our BEING emanates. Hence the first commandment directs that we should love God with all our hearts, all our minds and with all our souls. What originates in the heart gets channeled through the mind and informs the character of our souls! In one of his Psalms, David asks God to create in him a pure heart and to renew within him a steadfast and faithful Spirit (Psalm 51 verse 10).

In verses 21 and 22 of today’s gospel reading, Jesus outlines the evil thoughts that come from within, out of a person’s heart, which defile a person. On the other hand, in chapter 5 of his letter to the Galatians, St Paul points out the fruits of the Spirit that should inform our lives, thus preventing our hearts from being defiled by evil thoughts.

Were we to all live our lives taking heed of this empowering guidance from the Word of God, we would see less of the scourge of violence against the vulnerable and marginalized, especially women and children. It is the evil thoughts from the heart that lend some people into not thinking twice before they inflict horrendous acts of violence against other human beings. In the other scripture reading that was read earlier, James cautions us to be “quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to becoming angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.” He further advises that we should get rid of all moral filth and humbly accept the word of God, that we should not merely listen to the Word but that we should do what the Word says.

In today's Collect, we acknowledge to God that His Word is truth, and we ask God to make us quick to listen and slow to speak so that the Word implanted in us would take root and nourish all we say and do.

Therefore, let us go out to the world, empowered by the Word of God, free of defiling evil thoughts to love and serve the Lord. Let us be the champions in the fight against violence on women and children and speak out against the widespread Femicide in our country. Our young women face gruesome deaths in the hands of the men who purport to love them and we as the Church are silent. Where is the Church that used to be vocal, the Church that was at the forefront in the fight against any acts of social injustice and violation of human dignity? The world needs the Church's vigilance now more than ever! AMEN.

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