

Readings for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

29th August 2021

First Reading: Song of Solomon 2:8-13

The voice of my beloved!

Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills.

My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag.

Look, there he stands behind our wall,
gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice.

My beloved speaks and says to me:

“Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away;
for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.

The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.

The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom;
they give forth fragrance.

Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.

Second Reading: James 1:17-27

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfilment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 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.

Gospel: St Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do

not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

‘This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

Then he 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.”

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.”

A Reflection for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

I’ve mentioned before that, when I was teaching, we had a school partnership in Malawi that I visited a number of times. Although Malawi is a predominantly Christian country, there are some areas with a significant Muslim population and our partner school was in one such area. On one of the occasions when I was visiting, I was invited by some of the girls and female teachers to come with them to the mosque for Friday prayers. It was an amazing experience, but one of the things that struck me about it was the care that they took beforehand in preparing me to go to the mosque. First, I was dressed so that no inappropriate bits of my skin or hair were showing and, when we arrived after a dusty walk, I removed my shoes, and my feet were washed with clean, cool water before we went in.

In some cultures, such acts of ritual cleansing or purification are important, though it’s not something we are generally in the habit of doing here. Having said that though, over the past year and a half, we have got used to using hand sanitiser on a regular basis- each time we go into a shop or a restaurant, each time we come to church. It has quickly become an accepted ritual of our culture that this is what we should do. It’s one of the ways we have helped to protect ourselves and one another during the pandemic.

Today’s Gospel reading starts with some of the Pharisees and Jews questioning Jesus about why his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is without washing them. What they were suggesting, and the practices described, seem like eminently good hygiene measures, but this was actually about ritual purity before God. The Jewish Law contained rules about Temple practice, for priestly families when consuming food that was dedicated to God, and these were not generally a concern to most people, especially perhaps a group of Galilean fishermen. However, as was their way, over the centuries, the tradition of the elders had expanded the scope of these laws. The Pharisees applied the laws to every aspect of daily life to demonstrate reverence and holiness and here they are questioning why Jesus’ disciples do not demonstrate similar reverence and holiness, despite the fact that these practices were not followed by all Jews at the time.

It's too easy for us to see the Pharisees as a sort of religious police, hypocritically trying to appear holy themselves and to catch other people out. Here they are critical of the disciples, in doing so falling into the trap that it is much easier to see fault in the ways of others than our own. But, in their zeal to keep themselves and others holy, they are missing the point, and Jesus sought to correct their understanding with a new teaching about what it means to be clean or unclean.

We also have to be careful not to miss the point. The point here is not to make scapegoats of the Pharisees, or the Jews, or some subset of them. To do so is to risk falling into a similar feeling of self-righteous superiority as implied here. Neither is the point is to denounce the Jewish Law, and Jesus did not do this. It was, after all, the foundation of his own faith and source of our own.

Jesus is not saying that what we do is unimportant, but that what matters most is our attitude before God. Following all the purification rituals we can think of will have no effect if our heart is not in the right place. Here, the heart is to be understood as the centre of one's will and decision-making and Jesus is telling us that sin is matter of the heart rather than whether or not one breaks certain rules about ritual purity.

Of course, although Jesus puts the emphasis for purity on our hearts rather than ritual acts, it does not mean that actions are unimportant. Jesus provides a list of evils that come from the heart that includes both actions and attitudes – although note that he doesn't say that evil is all that comes from the heart. But both actions and attitudes matter; both reflect our relationships with God and with other people. How we feel, act and behave towards others should flow from our relationship with God.

This connection between our faith in God and how we live out that faith in our lives is a major theme of the letter of James, and today we begin a series of New Testament readings from this letter. This letter is usually attributed to James the brother of Jesus, leader of the Jerusalem church, and addressed to Jewish Christians of the diaspora-people who would have been regarded as outsiders in the communities in which they lived. James starts the letter by encouraging them to stick with their faith when they face trials and, in today's passage, urges them to 'be doers of the word and not merely hearers'. He recognised the importance then, as now, of our lives being coherent with the faith we profess. Onlookers are quick to notice if they are not.

To illustrate his point, James gives his readers a somewhat surprising word picture of someone who looks in a mirror and then goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. In our society, that seems inconceivable, possibly because we set too much store by appearance. But even in Biblical times, people would have seen their reflections and known what they looked like, so I suspect that James is using a somewhat extreme example to make us take note. To the person who forgets what he or she looks like, his or her appearance makes absolutely no impression. As Christians, he cautions us not to be like that in our attitude to God and God's word. God's word is not something we should read or hear and think 'that's interesting' but then go away and forget about it. It should make an impression on us. It should change how we think and respond.

James suggests three ways that we can consciously act on God's word: being quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger. To act in this manner prioritises relationships. Our relationship with God as we listen to God's word and consider its implications for our life. And our relationships with others – it is probably not too difficult for any of us to recall occasions when we know we have not listened carefully enough, or spoken too hastily, or got cross, and

regretted it. If we are quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger, we don't immediately leap in with our own desires and opinions but take time to consider those of others.

These passages are challenging, and they should be. We are being reminded that the practices of our faith should never just be routine ritual acts akin to using hand sanitiser when we enter new buildings, things that we promptly forget when we leave. Even if we can't remember the detail, (and many can't), we need to be prepared to be changed by the things we hear and do that speak to us of God's word. Things that gradually work in our hearts and enable our attitudes to become more Christ-like, and in turn change for the better how we behave towards and relate to others. We also need to see these challenges within the wider picture of God's love and mercy towards us; God who promises to be with us and to help us.