



Sermon preached by Revd. Peter Ball on 20th August 2023

Readings: Psalm 67; Matthew 15:1-20

I have chosen today Psalm 67 to offer us a testing board for our thoughts on the Gospel reading. I have gone with verses 1-20 of chapter 15 rather than the lectionary suggestion of 10-20 as it felt odd to exclude the first ten verses. The Psalm speaks of how as the people of God we should sing the praises of the Lord in ways that will bear a rich harvest and will have people all across the world recognising and praising God. It has a common voice referring to us rather than I. Joyfulness is encouraged because the message is one of such hope and potential for justice. The Psalm calls for God's will to be known, not our own. When we do God's will, God is glorified and we are blessed. The message is for everybody and is inclusive. What a world that will be (perhaps we dream of) and yet roll on to our Matthew reading and the words coming out of people's mouths seem anything but those of praise and thanksgiving if what Jesus is saying is anything to go by. Our human nature has got in the way of God's plan.

So, let's look more closely at the passage. What we have here is one side of a conflict between church and synagogue in a particular situation at the end of the first century. I think it is important if we are going to reflect on this passage to firmly implant in our minds that we need to avoid simplistic caricatures of the historical Pharisees or of portraying those of different theological outlooks to ourselves in the colours of the Pharisees. Every religious community needs tradition as the vehicle for interpreting the Word of God. No one has or can have the "pure word of God" uncontaminated by human ideas or tradition. The treasure is always in clay pots and it is good to remember this and to approach the reading in a non-judgemental, open minded way.

I am struck by the opening comments by the Pharisees as only four years ago we would have seen this question of, why do your disciples ignore the ceremonial hand washing as irrelevant to us today. And yet Covid changed all that. How did we view people who did not use hand sanitizer or a face mask? Usually by not letting them in and viewing them as irresponsible or mad individuals risking the health of others. Context is vital to understanding both actions and words so let's not demonize the Pharisees for the question.

What follows offers us insights and thoughts for today. Firstly in and through human tradition and because of Jesus the early church were hearing the word of God in a fresh and definitive way. The church of every generation needs to continue to listen for that new and fresh word from the Spirit rather than just depending on tradition. I do think as we reflect over the last fifty years or perhaps longer we have been slow to listen, adapt and display the freshness,

relevance and vibrancy of faith and of what God is doing in today's world and how we need to join in where God is at work in real and meaningful ways as a church understanding the world of 2023 and seen as a relevant part of the answers to the big issues of our day.

We are talking about the holiness that lies at the centre of the reading. It is in the end holiness rather than ritual that God looks for and will allow the people to raise their voices in praise as the Psalmist declares. Jesus in Matthew is concerned for the intent of the heart and what comes out through the mouth. The danger of defilement of our hearts, minds and words is all around us and to have an awareness is vital. In the light of Jesus teaching and example, Christians of every generation need to see themselves as belonging to a community called to holiness and to ask in our generation what violates this holiness and nullifies the church's witness. This is not about how we do things or style of worship and can be applied to pioneering, Fx or more traditional church and worship. It is the signs of holiness that will bind us to God and each other and be attractive to others. Our vocation is to God's people in a secular and pluralistic world. The big question is what sets us apart in order to serve in God's world and how do we share this truth? The truth of an attractive, life-changing faith that is changing people's lives, ours included, day by day. There was an old hymn I remember from childhood called "This is our story this is our song praising our Saviour all the day long". This is a story worth knowing and sharing. The debate and questions are as relevant to us as they were in Matthew's situation. And the answers really do make a difference.

Peter Ball

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