

**Pentecost 13**  
**30/8/2009**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Song of Solomon 2:8 - 13**

**Psalm 45**

**James 1:17 - 27**

**Mark 7:1 – 8, 14-15, 21-23**

### **Life with the agent from the age to come**

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A few years ago, following the build up of stress on the Muslim community, the local Neighbourhood Centre held a “Muslim Information Night” at the T0wn Hall. An Imam who spoke said the two key things that he spent time on were teaching young people the Q’ran and ensuring his people could decode food labels so as to understand the code for pork. Attitudes towards different sorts of food and drink are strongly connected with the sense of identity that goes with belonging to an ethnic or religious community. These attitudes are often expressed in rules that form part of a holiness code. What you eat and with whom is significant. When people migrate into new environments where the receiving community lives by different customs and rules tensions build up that may produce conflict or a crisis of identity. We know from the letters of Paul, and the book of Acts that this clash was a live issue for the early church as Christian faith spread across cultural borders. But the issues are not that far from us. This is Refugee Sunday, and in Australia on a regular basis we receive people from other cultures who introduce us to new traditions of identity and hospitality. And let us not forget it is only a few decades ago that the one thing most people knew about Methodists was that they did not drink alcohol!

In the Gospel Jesus, who not long before in a deserted place fed a multitude of people with five loaves and two fish, is challenged by a group of religious leaders over whether his disciples were observing the traditional practices related to eating and drinking. This is not a controversy about hygiene. It is a question of violating a tradition of ritual cleansing before eating food. Jesus himself had trouble over what you eat and who with. As the agent of the unseen Living God, the God of the Age to Come, he was led by a freedom that enabled him to risk transgressing the laws of purity and hospitality to the point of become untouchable himself. It happens in the reading we will hear next week, and in today’s reading, Jesus’ actions signal a deeper issue is at stake.

In reply to his questioners Jesus says: (v 15) “...*there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.*” The idea that the good creation contains no food that defiles is used to challenge the power of a religious tradition that has spawned many rules that cover over this truth. He goes further: (v 21-23): true defilement springs from *inner* distortion, rather than from incorrect external observance. The issue is focussed in a quote from Isaiah (29:13) :-

*This people honours me with their lips  
but their heart is 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.*

Jesus identifies with a long line of prophetic criticism directed against a misplaced emphasis on religious observance that subverted the praise of God and curtailed the flow of gracious acts of charity and justice.

At one level Jesus seems to be putting at risk the whole edifice of Jewish religion, but Judaism was not monolithic. The Scribes and Pharisees who confronted him differed amongst themselves in the weight they gave to tradition. Jesus is not here rejecting all ritual laws, setting his audience free from all external forms of religious practice. He criticized the misuse of religious forms, especially the slippage that allowed secondary things to take the place of things that are ultimate.

We know religious practice is more than keeping up a façade: following the rules carefully, mouthing the right things and appearing to be holy. We also know that if faith is going to be more than a private inner feeling, it is meant to show itself in right actions that are nurtured by personal and communal practices that have integrity. If we are serious about faith we know it becomes part of our daily and weekly struggle to let the praise of God become the first thing in our heart, leading us into life.

These few verses of Mark appear on a border that reflects Jesus' ministry so far in Jewish territory, and foreshadows his ministry to the Gentiles as he leads the community faith from Jerusalem to the uttermost parts of the world. In this process his disciples move beyond the predictability of their comfort zone and are challenged to face new discoveries while staying focussed on the things that really matter. Jesus may seem to be trying to patch up an old tradition, or even redefining the practice of faith. But he is the agent from the age to come, and his leadership causes conflict between old things and new. The question is: what is the right relationship between what he offers, and the traditions that have nurtured the faith of the people thus far?

In the New Testament there are different answers to this question but here Jesus says that all defilement comes from the heart – the centre of the will. Therefore a heart not set on God will not lead to a life that expresses the will of God. Here Mark touches on the prophetic and ethical purpose of right belief and practice: they are meant to allow people to live freely in the grace of God, so that the praise of God and the service of God are integrated. For Jews and Christians faith and practice are responses to the gifts of God, given before we ask. At its core the biblical tradition does not separate faith and action. Where the heart is focussed determines what the will expresses, which is why it is entirely consistent to expect Gospel people to do Gospel things.

Jewish practice may have been distorted by some in Jesus' day but the underlying intention was that maintaining the traditions would cause a person to be so absorbed in imbibing God's Law that a Godly life would flow naturally.

For Christians the aim of participating in the sacraments and applying ourselves to prayer and reflecting on scripture is not to gather information but to place ourselves in a position where we may become ever more sensitive to who God is for us, and how that is meant to affect our life. A Christian is someone who strives to live from a conscience positively formed by the Gospel; whose heart is centred on God's love for the world revealed in Jesus Christ.

After this controversy Jesus moved to Gentile territory where he encountered an unexpected readiness for faith. The contrast is intended. The concerns the Jerusalem leaders expressed were misplaced and they were in danger of acting in a way that was confining, excluding, and potentially idolatrous. There is a warning here. It behoves people of faith to continually look at what we have set our hearts upon. We must continue to ask whether what we hold dear takes us back to the central concern: the praise of God and the service of God. Otherwise the thing that was once lush and living may instead become like a petrified forest – a thing rigid and dry, devoid of life. This does not mean we change things for the sake of change. It does mean we continue to ask: do our traditions and practices focus on God in such a way that they constantly yield us new life? Do the things we value confine us in the narrow places of life, or are they agents of freedom that keep us open to the future, ready for the new possibilities of faith and life that God seeks to put before us.

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