

Song of Solomon 2:8-13

Psalm 45

James 1:17-27

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

What defiles a faith community?

Once on an aircraft I was seated next to a conservative Jewish couple who were negotiating the trip with their very restless four year old daughter. The couple had various means of trying to keep her quiet and at one point opened a packet of biscuits. Embarrassed because my peace on the journey was being disrupted they offered me one and said: Its “Kosher!” Kosher is an old purity code, which created rules and practices to protect Jewish religion and culture from contamination by outsiders and outside influences. Kosher is pure. What is not Kosher defiles.

What is it that defiles a faith community? The reading from Mark is about that very question. After crossing the Sea of Galilee Jesus disembarked in Gentile territory where the locals greeted him enthusiastically and sought his healing power. All this is a metaphor for the mission and meaning of what God is doing through Jesus’ ministry. As the agent of God’s loving-kindness he is breaking down ethnic and theological barriers to offer “healing” to people beyond the stated community of faith. He offered them a touch of God that was inclusive, merciful and reconciling. But the religious leadership were hostile, finding fault with him on the grounds that he and his disciples were in breach of the code of purity laws set out in Leviticus 11-15. They were not only eating with unwashed hands: they were associating with the great unwashed.

The Pharisees defended their position on the grounds that faithfulness to the purity laws was fundamental to the identity of the people. In reality it had become a power game that protected their own elitist position, and gave them grounds for excluding others from their “superior” tradition of faith and practise.

In Mark Jesus’ counter argument changes the site of purity and defilement from the body to the heart. It is not what goes into the body that defiles, he says, but what comes out. Eating pork with unwashed hands won’t lead you to commit murder or adultery or betray those close to you. It is what comes out, born of the intentions of the heart that defines purity, because it reveals our real and deeper motivations. What is Kosher is redefined here. The boundaries of faith and practice are set in an entirely different place, one that severely judges Jesus’ opponents because, as the Gospel unfolds, they are shown to be guilty of being deceived in their hearts. They become people of evil intentions such as murder, wickedness, betrayal and deceit.

There is a story missing from the sequence of the reading that makes the point even more clearly. It is about Corban: the practise of making an offering to God that is actually in breach of a decree of God. The example given is of dedicating one's wealth and property to God, so that it is no longer possible to honour your parents and take care of them as the Law of Moses commanded. A rule invented by humans - a spurious religious tradition - was set against a central precept of the faith. A practice that looked holy was instituted that was in fact against God. The outcome was that those who would have been protected and sustained in the community were deprived of their God given rights. Community life was degraded. This was not new. The Lord had said through Isaiah: *This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.* Jesus quoted these words to his opponents. They were alienated from God, "in their hearts" and their community life, and their participation in the mission of God was defiled.

All organizations and communities need rules and regulations to live by to protect their participants and members and to ensure fair play. But, it is still possible to slip and pit one rule against another, without reference to the underlying principle that is meant to govern all. Churches and communities are affected in just the same way. At the end of his Presidential term Davis McCaughey deplored the fact that the new Uniting Church tended to make decisions rather too much according to regulation. He wanted to see the growing book of regulations halved! We were trying to make life safe by getting the rules right. But we had lost our ecclesiastical markers. The real danger was that we would begin to live by fear, not faith.

At another level, from the late 1980s the fear of litigation encroached on of our community life with the result that it has become harder and harder to run a traditional community organization. Risk management is the talk of the day. Some groups have ceased to offer the services they once did because the insurance is too expensive and the risk is too great. At the same time bureaucracies are busy developing policies to cover every kind of risk or fault so that soon, even in the church, the pile of policies will be thicker than the pulpit bible. And will we be safer when the last policy is placed on file, and all our workers are covered by the multitude of regulatory checks? Or will something have been buried? Something that needs to stay before us front and centre to shine a light on all that we do and say? Risk management is important, but in the end the church is called to live at risk: the risk of faith that sets its heart on God, and trusts not in rules, but seeks safety in the one who calls us to be God's people, offering worship and service in his name before the world.

There is another way in which, even in a secular sense, the lesson from Mark can be taken to heart. We are now witnessing a sad return to the controversies over the Asylum Seekers that were a mark of the Howard years, which coincidentally was a time when the idea of what it meant to be "un-Australian" began to be bandied about. The Tampa incident was a defining moment of those years. As a result many people saw that not only had our government done something illegal, it had breached something else: a deep seated view of what it meant to be Australian. We have a tradition of defining ourselves as the people of a fair go, but from that time, "a fair go" has become conditional. For example: a fair go is given to you, if you don't try to come here by boat. It is fear that drives this sort of thinking and it is fear that deceives our heart. It turns a former pattern of hospitality, based on a fair go, into something churlish and punitive and wrong.

Much from those years has come back to visit us. We can argue about whether or not the re-introduction of offshore processing is legal. But of far deeper concern is that once, during the Vietnam years for example, our hearts were in a different place. We took a far more compassionate approach to those who, like our own ancestors, came to our shores by boat, and found an opportunity to start a new life.

In biblical terms “cleanliness” is not about washing on the outside, it is a question of whether we live according to “consistency of heart”. In this case the question is whether, like Jesus and the disciples, we are willing to embrace those who are outside the fold, because we are motivated by something deeper – a greater love that has reached out to touch us, and called us to live life on a basis different from the rest.

The beautiful poem that was the first reading today is taken to be an allegory of the love of God for the people of God. In Jewish tradition *The Song of Solomon* is read in private at the time of the Passover. At the time of their feast of freedom, people of faith meditate on these words: *Arise my love, my fair one, and come away, for now the winter is past...the flowers appear on the earth, and the time of singing has come* [Song 2:10-12].

It is Love that seeks us out. *A faith community is defiled* when it lives by fear. When it bypasses the call of faith to act on risk management principles, or regulations, or moral precepts. What is Kosher, and what keeps a community pure, is living according to the love that calls us and seeks to lead us, in all our ways, despite the risk.
