

Sermon for 13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity 10am Parish Eucharist St Mary's Barnes on 29 August 2021  
preached by the Revd Sister Margaret Anne ASSP

In our gospel reading today from Mark ( Mark 7. 1-18,14-15,21-23) we find Jesus, as so often, at variance with the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day. The Pharisees and scribes begin the argument by challenging Jesus in noticing that his disciples eat without washing their hands first. The reference to the washing of hands here is one of ritual purity in the Jewish Law. The scribes and Pharisees criticise Jesus for his disciples, as they see it, failing in this respect to keep their time-honoured and sacred tradition. Jesus knows that these criticisms, far from being motivated by good intent, are rather fuelled by jealousy and envy, and he rebukes his critics by quoting from the prophet Isaiah: he makes the point strongly that his critics are really hypocrites, and that their arguments would put human tradition concerning relatively minor issues above the essential command of God to love God and one's neighbour. Then Jesus turns to the crowd and goes straight to the point. Whereas the Pharisees had been concerned with externals and appearances, God is concerned with the inner and the spiritual. It is what is inside our hearts and minds that matters: are we envious and proud like the critical Pharisees, or are we making a priority God's law of love? At least that is the challenge implied in Jesus' words here. And it is a challenge for all of us. For it is the list of sins spelt out here by Jesus – deceit, envy, pride etc – that will really defile us, not whether or not we keep minor ritual and social customs.

Jesus here prepares his followers for one of the great truths that will become apparent to the disciples after his death and resurrection. For Jesus' death and resurrection will bring to an end the ceremonial law. Sacrifices will no longer be necessary, for Jesus himself is the one atoning sacrifice for all times and all places. The Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament makes this clear in some detail. But what will still be of great importance – even after Jesus' death and resurrection – will be the moral law, as outlined in the 10 Commandments and summed up in the command to love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

The real test of this of course is how we live our lives, not merely in our words but in our deeds. This central point is also made in our first reading today from the Letter of James ( James 1. 17-27). We are to be "doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves". Pure religion is to care for those in need and distress in practical ways and to keep oneself from the kinds of waywardness that Jesus lists so graphically as the end of today's gospel reading from Mark.

All this of course is a tall order. To live a genuinely Christian life is not easy. Jesus never said it would be easy. I am reminded of a saying in the book by the medieval English mystic Julian of Norwich in her Revelations of Divine Love:

"He did not say: You will not be assailed, you will not be tempest-tossed, you will not be disquieted, but he said: You will not be overcome".

Julian even more famously wrote, quoted by the poet TS Eliot in his Four Quartets:

"All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well".

We live in this life in which the world is deeply troubled and conflict and strife and wars and great human suffering and evil are all too evident. In recent weeks as we have received news of events in Afghanistan, it has been deeply painful to see the images, to hear the reports, of all that has been going on there. As Christians we believe that Jesus himself bore all suffering and evil and transformed creation through the manner of his life, death by crucifixion and resurrection. While man's inhumanity to man continues apace across the globe, it is important that we continue to live in

hope and strive to do our best to lead lives that are conformed to Christ's life, for he is the great pattern of our calling. To the very end he endeavoured to demonstrate God's love, and we must do the same.

Yesterday was the feast of St Augustine of Hippo, who famously wrote:

"Love, and do what you like".

Augustine was one of the 4 Latin Doctors of the Western Church. He was born in North Africa in 354 AD. An orator and rhetorician, his career led him from Carthage, where he kept a mistress, to Rome and then to Milan, where the Imperial court then resided. As a young man he rejected Christianity and was influenced by Manichean thought. Augustine wrestled inwardly, in great conflict in his mind between honours, wealth, marriage on the one hand, and the growing call to a life dedicated wholly to God on the other. His spiritual autobiography entitled *Confessions* vividly describes his journey of such inner conflict. While staying at a house with a friend Augustine went out into the garden, grappling with his spiritual conflict of mind and soul. Weeping with sorrow, suddenly he heard the singing voice of a child nearby. The voice repeated the refrain:

"Take it and read, take it and read".

To the anguished Augustine this seemed like a divine command, and he hurried to where he had left a copy of the Bible. He opened it, and it fell open at the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of St Paul's Letter to the Romans. Augustine read:

"Not in revelling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ; spend no more thought on nature and nature's appetites".

Augustine wrote:

"I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled".

There was no going back for Augustine after this water-shed moment of conversion. He was baptised at the Easter Vigil and returned to Africa where he formed a kind of monastic community. He was ordained a priest and five years later elected Bishop of Hippo. For 34 years he was one of the greatest bishops of the history of the Christian Church, and one of its most influential writers. His written output was voluminous, including many letters, sermons and treatises. Throughout he emphasised the sovereignty of the grace of God. He died in the year 430 AD. On this day following his feast, we give thanks for Augustine and his significant influence on Christian thought down the centuries.

Augustine is renowned for a number of pithy sayings in his writings. One such saying concerning humility was:

"Do you wish to rise? Begin with descending. You plan a tower that will pierce the clouds? Lay first the foundation of humility".

The Pharisees and scribes who criticised Jesus in our gospel reading from Mark today could have done with a dose of humility. Jesus in his teaching frequently upheld the values of the Kingdom of God, values such as humility, love and truth. Such Kingdom values invariably turn worldly values

upside down. Humility and simplicity are to be valued, not pride and wealth and status. As we reflect on our readings and Jesus' teaching, let's examine ourselves and ask how we might grow in humility and compassion. Above all, let's set our hearts and minds on the values of God's Kingdom, and – in this troubled world – endeavour to put into practice ways in which those Kingdom values might draw us and others closer to the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.