

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost—29 August 2021

Revd Martin Johnson

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9, James 1:17-27, Mark 7:1-8, 14-23

No place for ideology

[As I write newsfeeds are flooded with the events at Kabul International Airport many have been killed and injured by Islamic militants. Once again we are confronted by events that are difficult if not impossible to comprehend. As one writer put it: 'The capacity of people to behave in ways that are incomprehensible to those who do not share the same beliefs and values is one of the abiding mysteries of human existence.' One thing is sure that violence begets violence, we can but wait and see what happens now in that war torn nation. As W.H. Auden in his poem September 1 1939 prophetically wrote: *I and the public know what all schoolchildren learn, Those to whom evil is done Do evil in return.*]

At the offertory after the gifts have been brought to the altar the celebrant washes their hands. This action is called the *Lavabo* – Latin for 'I will wash.' A short sentence or prayer is recited quietly. 'I wash my hands in innocence, O Lord: that I may go about your altar, and lift up the voice of thanksgiving: to tell of all your marvelous works.' Words from Psalm 26. Or another 'Lord, wash away my iniquity, cleanse me from my sin' words taken from Psalm 51. This washing has nothing to do with hygiene, it is symbolic cleansing, a reminder of the need to be cleansed before handling sacred things.' In today's environment however, quite rightly, it has taken on a practical meaning; it is now about both symbolism and hygiene and I wonder if perhaps this was its original purpose.

In today's passage from Matthew's gospel we hear the Pharisees complain the disciples are not washing their hands before eating. What's happening here? Is this symbolism or hygiene? If you look at the Book of Leviticus you will find a great many laws about cleanliness and uncleanness and it seems that other oral rules and traditions stemmed from these. When the Pharisees speak of the 'Tradition of the Elders' it is these oral rules they are speaking of and this is like a red rag to a bull to Jesus!

Now the context here is important here. The disciples have returned from the field, from the feeding of the 5000, the town would have been buzzing with the news of this great gathering. I would suggest that the Pharisees were unimpressed, hence they challenge the disciples by concentrating on the finer points of law. They hone in on whether the disciples washed their hands. No doubt at the feeding there would have been little, if any, consideration to the finer points of food handling hygiene, let alone law. The issue of washing hands and washing food from the market is really quite uncontroversial, we do it today, or at least we should. It is a matter of basic hygiene and I would suggest it is why originally such laws were put in place, but through the 'Tradition of the Elders' and in the hands of the lawyers they had taken on religious significance – ritual purity, and this is where the problem lies. The bread was a sign of feeding, all comers, plenty left for everyone, twelve baskets. The washing was a sign of division, it takes on an ideology – have you washed your hands? Are you clean? Jesus accuses the Pharisees of holding to human tradition, I would suggest this is 1st century speak for ideology.

Among the many issues of our day, whether it be the environment, vaccines, COVID restrictions, politics or religion...ideology it seems is trumping what should be quite simply our responsibility to care for one another and the world around us. Jesus was bringing life,

remember in John's gospel it is the giving of his very self, in the Bread of Life; the Pharisees could only say 'ah yes, but did you wash your hands!' In the warped ideology of some today we hear 'why should I wash my hands or wear a mask,' we know what Jesus would say, 'I have come to bring life.'

Jesus presents us with a problem, a delicious problem. He refuses to be tied to anything that could be understood as ideological. His very being is this reconciliation which we find almost impossible. In Jesus, there is no division between this world and the kingdom, we find this very difficult. Think too of the enigmatic Jesus who says I have not come to do away with the law, not one jot of it. For Jesus the separation of love and law is an artificial one, they are servants of one another in Jesus' mind. Simple laws about hygiene in the hands of Pharisees had taken on an ideological bent, Jesus doesn't reject the law but he rejects the ideology.

The great Scottish philosopher John Locke once wrote 'ill deserves the name of confinement, which hedges us in only from bogs and precipices. So that, however it may be mistaken, *the end of law is, is not to abolish or restrain, but to preserve and enlarge freedom.*' This is an important axiom for our time of restrictions and regulation, unless they are ultimately to bring freedom then they are mistaken, wrong. St James takes this to another level when he speaks of the perfect law of freedom.

The problem with ideologues is that they tend to be monolingual, unable to sit with ambiguity or nuance, they tend towards fundamentalism and what happens then is that often fail to practice what they preach. This is a problem that Jesus addresses in the gospel and with which James famously begins his epistle. In Jesus there is, in himself, perfect reconciliation, no division, not a hint of hypocrisy. James picks this up with the wonderful parable of looking in the mirror, we too are challenged to look and really see.

I am not comparing the Pharisees with Islamic militants. But we can see in the events in Kabul, the awful consequences of the clash between religion and ideology. We have seen how the simple act of hand washing can be a source of an ideological divide, and it is present too within our own faith, Christian fundamentalism is as much ideology as faith. The Taliban and others have taken this to an extreme and of course we reject it.

James reminds us '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.' It is a good place for us to begin, there can be no place for ideology in the care of the most vulnerable. Amen.