

## *Clean or unclean?*

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B—1 September 2024

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*Mark 7.1-8, 14-23*

Now, because I'm a priest, you can believe every word of this opening story. Some friends of mine arrived home from their holidays to discover that the fellow who had been lining their house had accidentally unplugged their meat freezer. On the day I visited Rod, when he opened the window to speak to me, I thought, Oh Rod, you need some Palmolive Gold in a big way.

He explained what had happened to the freezer. Rod obviously knew something had to be done. Now, what's the best way to clean a rotten interior? Rod knew exactly what to do. He got a rag and a bucket of hot soapy water and began to clean down the outside of the appliance. He was sure the odour would disappear with a good shine, so he polished and buffed it, and when he'd finished, that machine sparkled. When he opened the door, the freezer was still revolting.

Are you wondering what sort of a fool would do such a thing? Let me go on.

No problems, he thought. I know exactly what to do. The freezer needed some friends. We'd stick too, if we had the social life of a machine. So Rod threw a party.

He invited all the appliances from the neighbouring kitchens. It was hard work, but he filled the house with refrigerators, stoves, microwaves, washing machines. It was a great party. A couple of toasters recognised each other from the appliance store and had a few laughs about limited warranties. The blenders were a big hit though. They really mixed well.

Rod was sure the social interaction would cure the inside of his freezer, but he was wrong. He opened the door and the stench was worse than before. Are you wondering what kind of a fool would do such a thing? Let me go on.

Now what? Rod had an idea. If a polish didn't work and social life didn't help, Rod decided to give his freezer some status. He brought a Mercedes-Benz sticker and stuck it on the door. He painted one of those bright new ties on the front and put a trendy Save the Whale sticker on the back. Then he installed a mobile phone on the side. Rod splashed on some cologne and gave it a credit card for extra clout.

Then he backed away and admired that high-class freezer. You might even make the cover of *Popular Mechanics*, he told it, and the machine blushed. Then he opened the door expecting to see a cleaned inside, but what he saw was still putrid.

Are you wondering what sort of a fool would do such a thing? Let me go on. One more thing came to mind. The freezer needed some high-voltage pleasure. He immediately bought us some copies of *Playfridge* magazine, the publication that displays freezers with their doors open and their shelves exposed. He then tried to get the freezer a date with the resting house next door, but she gave him a cold shoulder. After all the supercharged entertainment, Rod opened the door and so bad was the smell he almost threw up.

Well, let's bring all of this agony to a halt. Nothing could remove the putrid problem but a good clean on the inside and being replugged into its source of power.

No one in their right mind would ever do what Rod did, would they? Don't you bet on it. People, including you and I, do it all the time. Our hearts and minds will run to just about

anything to resolve our problems rather than go to God. We would prefer to polish up our looks or become party animals or to get trendy or pursue pleasure than deal with our relationship with God and that's why it often did.

And that's what precisely Jesus is saying in the Gospel reading this morning. It's not what's on the outside that counts; it's what's going on inside that matters. God knows the thoughts of our hearts. He sees the inside. Jesus knew that for the Jew the Lord meant two things. It meant first and foremost the Ten Commandments and second the first five books of the Old Testament or, as they're called, the Pentateuch.

Now it is true that the Pentateuch contains a certain number of detailed regulations and instructions but, in the matter of moral questions, what is laid down is a series of great moral principles that were to apply. For a long time, the Jews were content with that but around the 4th and 5th centuries BC there came into being a class of legal experts known as the scribes. They weren't content with great moral principles. They had a passion for clear and distinct definition. They wanted these great principles amplified, expanded, broken down until they issued in thousands and thousands of little rules and regulations governing every possible action and every possible situation in life. Some of these rules and regulations were still being worked on and written down long after Jesus' earthly ministry.

One of the scribes' regulations comes out in our Gospel reading this morning: the washing of hands. The scribes and pharisees accused Jesus' disciples of eating with unclean hands.

There were definite rigid rules for the washing of hands. Note that this hand washing means not in the interest of hygienic purity. It was ceremonial cleanness that was at stake. Before every meal and between each course the hands had to be washed and washed in a certain way. Water stored in special stone jars, clean, not used for any other purpose, placed where nothing could contaminate them. Hands held with fingers pointing up, water to run down at least to the wrist, the amount of water to be used—a quarter of a log, equal to one and a half eggshells full of water. And while the hands were still wet, each fist was rubbed into the palm of the other and the procedure reversed with fingertips pointing downward. Failure to do this was in Jewish eyes not bad manners, not even dirty in the health sense, but to be unclean in the sight of God.

To the scribes and Pharisees these rules and regulations were the essence of religion. To observe them was to please God, to break them was to sin. This was their idea of goodness and serving God.

Notice I said this that was their idea. When challenged about his disciples not observing the law, Jesus took them back to the passage where Isaiah accused the people of his day of honouring God with their lips while their hearts were far away. Now Jesus accused the scribes and pharisees of hypocrisy.

What he's saying is that anyone to whom religion is a legal thing, anyone to whom religion means carrying out certain external rules and regulations, anyone to whom keeping a certain number of taboos is essential, is in the end bound to be a hypocrite, because he believes that he is a good man if he carries out the correct practices no matter what his heart and thoughts are like. He might hate his fellow men with all his heart. He might be full of envy and concealed bitterness and pride. None of that mattered provided he washed his hands correctly and observed all other minute regulations. He would be right with God.

I think not. Legalism takes account of man's outward actions, but it takes no account of his inner feelings. He may be meticulously serving God in outward things and bluntly disobeying God in inward things—and that is hypocrisy.

There's no greater religious peril than identifying goodness with religious acts. Church attendance, Bible reading, careful financial giving, even timetabled prayer will not necessarily make us right with God. The fundamental question is how is our heart towards God and our fellow men? If your heart is full of enmity, bitterness, grudges, pride, you know that all the religious observance will not change your relationship with God one bit.

The second accusation Jesus levelled against these legalists was that they substituted the effort of human ingenuity for the laws of God, as their guidance for life didn't depend on listening to God. They depended on listening to clever arguments and debates, the fine bargain niceties, the ingenious interpretation of the legal experts. It had become so absurd that there were many cases where the strict performance of the scribal law made it impossible to carry out the Ten Commandments. Here, Jesus was attacking a system that put rules and regulations before the claim of human need.

The commandment of God was that the claim of human love came first. The commandment of the scribes was that the claim of legal rules and regulations should come first. Remember the parable of the Good Samaritan: the priest passed the victim by because he didn't wish to become ceremonially unclean.

Never allow rules to paralyse the claims of love. In the statement that nothing that goes into a man can make him unclean, Jesus was wiping out in one stroke the laws for which Jews had suffered and died. No wonder they were amazed.

In effect Jesus was saying that *things* can't be unclean or clean in any real religious sense of the term. Only persons can be really defiled, and what defiles a person is his own actions, which are the product of his own heart. The Jew had and still has a whole system of things that are clean and unclean.

With one sweeping pronouncement, Jesus declared the whole thing irrelevant and that uncleanness has nothing to do with what a man takes into his body but everything to do with what comes out of his heart. What comes out of a man is what makes him unclean. For out of men's hearts come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.

All these evils come from inside and make a man unclean. So, how's your freezer? Polished on the outside, rotten meat on the inside?