

Message for Sunday, 2nd September, 2018

(15th Sunday after Pentecost)

(Mark 7.1-8, 14-23, Song of Songs 2.8-13, Ps 45.1-2,6-9, James 1.17-27)

Well, on first glance at our wisdom readings for today, we may struggle to find the connection – the common thread that liturgically binds them together. But on closer inspection, I think really they are all about the way of the heart.

Song of Songs is a love poem or series of love poems which have caused much debate amongst scholars over the years. Is it purely human love or is there an allegorical meaning to the poetry that finds that the love concerns God and Israel or as some have maintained, love between Jesus and the Church?

The Jewish and Christian Canons certainly have different interpretations. Walter Brueggemann tells us that the human marking of the Song is without dispute. For our purposes today I think that it is reasonable to look to Brueggemann's quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer who suggests that the Song celebrates the unquestioned 'goodness' of creatureliness.

Psalm 45 is a psalm of love, with some interpreting this as a wedding song, most probably a psalm for a royal wedding. Others have treated it as a marriage between YHWH and Israel.

And in the epistle reading today, James urges everyone to look within their hearts – to not simply hear the word of God but to put into practice the compassion of God, caring for those who are in need.

And so, we come to the Gospel! We might say that the Gospel reading this week is given to us in pretty strong, clear language... but there is much to unpack in these words.

It is always good to try to contextualise the passage we are focussing on. This Sunday's passage comes after a section in which Mark describes the extraordinary works of power by Jesus – the feeding of the 5,000, the walking on water and incredible acts of healing where we are told that all who touched him, even the hem of his cloak, were healed.

It is at this point in the story that the religious authorities arrived from Jerusalem to see for themselves what was going on. It appears that they were there to investigate, to find fault in what was happening and of course they did. The disciples were not following 'their' rules for washing before eating. The ritual they referred to was not one mentioned in

Scripture but instead was a later interpretation which developed as a practice to remind the Jewish people that they needed to be clean and holy for God.

The trouble of course, with such practices is that, over time, they can become distorted and when this happens, they no longer fulfil their original purpose. They become simply a way of identifying those who observe the law and those who do not and this then becomes something that can be used to condemn the behaviour of others.

Jesus' response to the Pharisees and the scribes was a strongly worded rebuke. Mark records Jesus as saying (and here I use a passage that has been paraphrased) – "Well what did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites! These people honour me only in speech while their heart is far from me. Their worship is useless, for their doctrines are just human traditions and regulations.' You ignore the commandment of God and yet make a fuss about your ritual washing of pots, pans and all sorts of other things.'" (*Kym Harris, Pray as You Can*)

Jesus seems to reserve his harshest criticism for people like the pharisees and the scribes. Instead of using their religious practices to foster the love of God, to open their hearts with compassion for others, they used their practices and position to elevate themselves and condemn others.

Jesus, a practicing Jew, did not appear to be greatly concerned by the many observances and human practices that had become part of daily living for the Jewish people of his time – in the Torah there were no fewer than 613 laws which the Jewish people were expected to adhere to.

In contrast, Jesus offered very few practices to his disciples – we can name the Lord's Prayer and the celebration of the Eucharist as examples of where Jesus gave clear directions to his disciples.

While we understand that our religious practices can do us a great deal of good, we should never be tempted to think that we are good because of them. They should exist to help us know God more fully, to deepen our experience of the love of God, which in turn leads us in the way of compassion and holy justice.

Indeed our religious practices are like precious, fragile pots - easily broken. We need to hold them gently, cherishing the beauty, remembering why they are there, and giving thanks for the open space they can provide which allows God in, expanding our hearts in love.

In today's Gospel Jesus directs us to a major concern in the way we live our lives – and that is - the state of our hearts. We are presented with a list of transgressions which are part of the human condition. Dealing truthfully with any of these issues, whatever it may be, forces us to be honest with ourselves and with God.

Henri Nouwen, in his book 'The Way of the Heart' tells us that 'from the heart arise unknowable impulses as well as conscious feelings, moods, and wishes. The heart too is the centre of perception and understanding. Finally, the heart is the seat of the will. Thus the heart is the central and unifying organ of our personal life.'

It is in our heart and the hearts of others that God dwells and 'it is this heart that is the place of prayer'. Heart prayer doesn't allow us to limit our relationship with God to words or emotions that simply roll off the tongue. Nouwen goes so far as to say that 'By its very nature such prayer transforms our whole being into Christ precisely because it opens the eyes of our soul to the truth of ourselves as well as the truth of God.'

Today's Gospel passage actually provides us with a wonderful space for reflection and contemplation for when we unpack Jesus' teaching about how easily religious practices can become distorted and the real need to focus on our inner being, we are speaking about a mystery for which words are inadequate.

The readings today speak to our humanness – our capacity to open our hearts to love. And at times, by our actions, our capacity to close ourselves off from God and our neighbour.

Mark's Gospel calls us to look within our own hearts, for it is here that we find the true source of what can lead either to God's ways of truth, love and compassion or to unhealthy, diminishing and sometimes destructive behaviour.

We might say that it is through prayer and quiet reflection, that we are led to the heart of God. This is probably why so many of the mystics and great spiritual leaders throughout the centuries have been called to silence, to prayer and contemplation.

Some of our earliest contemplatives were known as the Desert Fathers (and there were Desert Mothers too). They lived in the Egyptian desert during the fourth and fifth centuries. Their flight to the desert was a way of escaping a tempting conformity to the world.

After a time, they became known for their wisdom and people would seek them out for healing, comfort and direction. The sayings of the Desert Fathers have been handed down through the centuries and still can offer us a valuable perspective for living today.

There is a story about the Desert Fathers which goes something like this -

'Three fathers used to go and visit blessed Abba Anthony every year and two of them would discuss their thoughts and the salvation of their souls with him, but the third always remained silent and did not ask him anything. After a long time, Abba Anthony said to him: "You often come here to see me, but you never ask me anything," and the other replied, 'It is enough to see you, Father.'

In other words, just being in the presence of St Anthony -someone so close to God - was enough – there was no need for dialogue. May we too seek to know God in the depth of our own heart and in the presence of holy people - that we may walk in God's way – indeed that would be enough!

Let us pray,

Holy and loving God, be with us this day and in the week to come. Enter our hearts as we search for your loving guidance, compassion and care. Transform our lives so that we may be reflections of your love and infinite mercy. We pray in the name of Jesus, the one who teaches us to live in love. Amen

(Acknowledgements – Walter Brueggemann, Henri Nouwen, Sr. Kym Harris)