

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

"Rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has power to save your souls." (James 1:^s21)

How can the Church teach Christian standards of morality to young people today? There is now no regular Religious Instruction, which used to provide some opportunity to introduce the topic. Some schools have quarterly seminars- but with the limited time available, morality can only come in as a side issue to the more direct teaching about the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Few churches today have Youth Groups, where discussions could be held on various concerns to the youngsters. And as in many areas of human experience, it is not easy for Christian parents to persuade their children that the Christian standards of morality are necessary for the living of a full and balanced life - young people tend to hear it as a restrictive and fuddy-duddy, old-fashioned line. And yes, it is restrictive, and yes, it is old-fashioned.

But no-one observing how the misuse of human sexuality and human attributes messes up lives, would agree that Christian standards are fuddy-duddy! Note that I said "human sexuality AND attributes", for misuse of sex is only one way in which people become less than what they were intended to be. Sins arising from sexual activity are by no means the worst kinds of sin - if there are in fact degrees of sin! They are the sins which attract the most attention in our society today certainly, but there are those more devastating to other people which slip by unnoticed, except to the one on the receiving end - and of course, God. For sins are actions which separate us from God. They are nearly always at the expense of, and to the detriment of our fellow human beings, children with us of the same Heavenly Father.

Listen again to that dreadful list given by Jesus in today's Gospel, and notice how few are sexual sins: "fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly." (Mark 7:21,22) Misuse of the in that list. So coupled with the a passage from St. James' letter to the Church to remind us that the tongue can lead us into sin. "If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues, but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless." (v.26)

The Jewish religious leaders of our Lord's time placed great emphasis upon ritual cleanliness. The requirement for a person to be physically clean before approaching God in worship is of ancient origin. There was also the requirement for cleanliness in certain circumstances before a person could rejoin the community - probably connected originally with health and hygiene. But by Jesus' time, all this had become part of religious ritual. The reason for the priest passing the injured traveller by, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, was not that he was callous or unsympathetic, but that he was on his way to perform his religious duties and was ritually clean. If he had stopped to help the wounded man, he would have to return home, bathe, and put on fresh clothing, and start again.

Perhaps the once hallowed Saturday night bath-night and the wearing of one's best clothes to church next day, stemmed from a traditional following of this ritual purification! Many clergy, after preparing the bread and the wine ready for consecration in the Holy Communion service, rinse their fingers ceremonially - but that is less a physical cleansing than a reminder that as they approach this holy situation, they should be spiritually clean. And running through their mind, or sometimes said aloud are the words from Psalm 51: "Wash me thoroughly from my wickedness, and cleanse me from my sin."

We wash our hands before meals, and encourage our children to do the same - endlessly, out of reason of hygiene. The criticism of the Pharisees directed to our Lord's disciples was not for that reason. St. Mark helpfully

includes a note for the benefit of his non-Jewish readers: "For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe: the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles." While this washing was undoubtedly a good thing to do, health-wise, that was not the main motive at this time. It was very much done in order to avoid supposed spiritual contamination from people regarded as being spiritually unclean.

Jesus was questioned about His disciples not observing these rules, and as He so often did He took the opportunity to teach the people about the real nature of purity and defilement, pointing out that sin or impurity arises from within a person, from his inner being. This was not an attack on the religious observances, many of which Jesus Himself practised, but rather to put them in their proper place. No amount of religious observance in itself can be of any avail while we still nurture in our hearts sinful desires - whether or not these express themselves in actual sinful acts.

Jesus put that pretty bluntly in the Sermon on the Mount, when He was spelling out the Christian interpretation of the Commandments. "You have heard that it was said to the men of old: You shall not kill But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment. You have heard that it was said: You shall not commit adultery. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Matt.5:21,22,27,28) The thought and the desire coming from within leads to the action, therefore the thought and the desire are sinful. This would **have** been quite a revolutionary thought to an orthodox Jew, who habitually thought of defilement and impurity as being contracted by **external** contact.

Ritual and ceremony have a value and a place as we seek to express worship. But to God, all hearts are open, all desires are known, and from Him no secrets are hidden. Our purity must be inward as well as outward. We tend to think that Man is a body and has a spirit. The truth is that Man is a spirit and has a body. Man is a living being.. Our bodies are entitled to careful and reverent treatment because they are the homes, however temporary, of Man's soul. Likewise we must respect the bodies of other souls.

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul asked: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you bought with a price. So glorify God in your body." (6:19,20) Nothing from the outside can defile that body, Jesus said. – only that which comes from within. Jesus showed that it is the **mind** not the stomach which is the source of impurity, defilement, uncleanness.

Moral purity, not ritual cleanliness, was to be for His followers the hallmark of godliness: keeping oneself unstained by the world. Christianity is a way of life. **THE** way of life demanded by Christ. It is not always a comfortable, easy way, and it is often in contrast to the way of the world. But Christ has called us to follow in His footsteps, and if we are to be faithful to our calling, we must seek that purity which He requires, of body, mind and spirit. **AMEN**

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From the Gospel Reading we have just heard: "They were astounded beyond measure, saying, He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak. (Mark 7:37)

Jesus had just restored sight and hearing to a man who had been deaf and afflicted with a speech impediment. And the crowd was most impressed. Here was a man who was not only a great preacher, but who had the power of healing, in the tradition of the ancient prophets - in fact some seemed to think that Jesus was Elijah, re-incarnated. "They were astounded beyond measure." Perhaps today they might not be so awestruck. There is a lot spoken and published about so-called "faith-healing"; there is a real place for Christian healing by prayer, laying-on of hands, and anointing; there are undeniable cures and healings at devotional shrines, such as Lourdes, in France; and there are marvellous things done by surgeons and doctors which are well-nigh miraculous. And if we too stay just at the superficial reading of the incident, we too might be impressed and even astounded beyond measure - but that is all. That wonderment would soon wear off!

The incident is, however, one more in a chain of marvellous happenings in our Lord's earthly life. One more thing to cause the disciples to wonder about this person whom they followed and called Master. It is one more incident in Holy Scripture to lead US to a deeper appreciation of the concern of God for us, His creatures.

To us, the revelation of Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ is complete. We know Him to be the Son of God, and knowing this, the greatest of all miracles, we hardly marvel at His power over the things of this world. If we did NOT know Him as Christ and Saviour, this or any other miracle would not mean much to us anyway, and certainly would not be sufficient of its self to convert us. So let look closer at the implications of the story.

There is a far worse form of deafness and dumbness than that recorded here. It is the deafness of those who WILL NOT listen to the voice of God; it is the dumbness of those who WILL NOT seek either to speak to Him in prayer, or of Him, in witness. We hear the voice of the world, clearly, and we pay plenty of attention to it. It is a very insistent voice. We hear the voice of our own desires, and we pay even more attention to that: it is a very persuasive voice, and we are basically selfish creatures.

But although God has so much to say to us, and although He has the words of eternal life, yet we have little time or inclination to listen to Him. We are deaf because we WILL NOT hear God speaking to us in our hearts. This is deafness indeed - the willful deafness of those who block their ears. He might want us to change our comfortable ways and our self-centered thinking; it might be uncomfortable and it might make us different from the others, if we listen to the prompting of God. "Like the deaf adder," says the Psalmist, "which stoppeth her ears; which refuseth to hear the voice of the charmer, charm he never so wisely." (58:4)

Quite often a person born deaf is also dumb, most commonly Rubella children. Not that there is any physical fault, but because they never hear speech to imitate it. Today these people can be taught to speak, through the work of the Oral Schools. But even so, it is quite likely that some impediment will remain. The frequent and natural result of willful deafness to the voice of God results in a spiritual impediment in our attempts at communication with God. When the time comes when we WANT to seek God and perhaps MUST find God, we might find that we cannot worship Him or pray to Him, and tragically, many people find themselves cut off entirely. God has not rejected them - they have done it themselves. And because God never forces our return to Himself, the way back if we DO turn back, is arduous.

For all of us, there come times when we find ourselves unable or unwilling to pray, or even reluctant to worship God at all. At such times we ought to ask ourselves: "Why?" and spend a little time in self-examination. Is it

lack of real concern for the things of God? Is it self-centredness, instead of God-centredness? Is there some matter in which I am willfully refusing to hear God because I know He will ask me to do something I don't want to do? Am I praying in effect: "Thy will be done - but not by me"?

The part of the country in which this incident took place was in Decapolis, just across the Sea of Galilee from Capernaum. In this area on a previous occasion, Jesus had healed a mentally sick man, and as a result the people ordered Him to leave their country - they were afraid of Him. Today a great number of people act in the same way - they are afraid of Him and they keep their distance. His standards are too high; His requests are too demanding; they are not prepared to make the sacrifices which they know they would have to make. They will not listen, and they shut the Holy Spirit out of their hearts in case His prompting becomes too uncomfortable. And here is where we come in. Here is where we, who have had some experience of His love and His power, must play our parts as His disciples - in our own homes and among our friends and neighbours and acquaintances. This does NOT mean buttonholing someone in the street or shop or business and asking: "Brother, are you saved?"! It is rather the word spoken with humble conviction as opportunity arises; it is the constant, devoted, uncomplaining service devoted to God and to our neighbour; it is the consistent, high standard of behaviour; it is THESE things which are so often fruitful in our vocation as disciples of Christ. God makes us articulate in some way within our nature, if we will listen to Him and make ourselves available to Him.

Jesus took the dumb man aside in private, away from the crowd, to heal him - away from the distractions and the noise. If we are to be Christ's faithful hearers, so that we may be effectual do-ers, He must be able to work this miracle of love in us first. And continually renew us. Therefore we must be always seeking to go aside with Him, away from the noise and distraction of the crowd. He Himself sought to go aside frequently, not to 'get away from it all,' in a selfish sense, but in order to keep His own will conformed to the will of the Heavenly Father. Time and again He spent hours in prayer. Surely we must make time to go aside from the world specifically to seek Him, to open ourselves to Him.

All too often though, the time we do give to God is filled with one-way conversation. We tend to spend it all in telling God what WE want HIM to do for US, or telling Him what WE think is best for others. Frequently we do not even think to add 'if it is Your Will.' When the prophet Samuel was a child, he heard his name spoken one night as he lay in his bed. The old priest, Eli, realizing that it was the voice of God Samuel had heard, advised the child to reply "Speak Lord, for your servant heareth.' He did not say, 'Listen Lord, for thy servant speaketh!'

And yet God is always more ready to hear than we are to pray, and is always inclined to give more than we deserve or even desire, which is far greater.

So let us seek continually, through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, Whom He sends, to have our ears opened and the string of our tongues loosed, so that we may praise Him, not only with our lips but in our lives, and by walking before Him in holiness all the days of our lives.

Amen

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"He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them: If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me..... For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"
(Mark.8:34 & 36)

It is becoming more and more difficult for Christians to worship God and still play their full part in the society in which they live. Once, it was no problem to attend Sunday worship, and also to take part in sporting events, working bees, and ordinary commerce. Today, Sunday has become just another working day for many; a convenient day for working bees for others; a sports day for still others. And Christians who are sportsmen and women, or want to pull their weight in organisations to which they belong, or work for certain firms, find themselves in a difficult dilemma.

The cult of physical health which arranges Fun Runs, Bicycle Health Rides, and other "Life be in it" activities, seems to ignore the need for development of spiritual life. Perhaps we should mount a "Spiritual Life be in it" campaign! The ovals and courts are crowded with youngsters on Sunday mornings - too bad if their parents want them to go to church. The matches would still go ahead, but the youngster would miss out: there are plenty who would not be at church in any case, even if there were no matches, no working bees, no shops open.

But what will it profit a man, a woman, a youngster, if he or she becomes a top athlete, or creates useful things for the community, or earns extra money, if he or she thereby forfeits eternal life? Because exactly that is at stake. To place the demands and the pleasures of this present life before the demands, and yes, the pleasures of following Christ, is to risk one's hope of eternal life.

When the Church proclaims that uncompromising statement of our Lord's, it is not a matter of blaming those various activities for drawing people away from something we have not made vital enough, or inviting enough, or interesting enough to withstand competition. It is not mere jealousy or envy by the Church of the world's success. It is with deep regret that we acknowledge that people have not heard what the Church has been saying, or have not heeded if they have heard. Perhaps we will have to answer on the Day of Judgement for our lack of eloquence!

We may be somewhat comforted to read of our Lord's grief over the people of Jerusalem in their rejection of Him: " O Jerusalem, Jerusalem how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not." (Matt.23:37)

It all comes down to a matter of priorities. And the priorities are set by the answer people give, consciously or unconsciously, to the question Jesus put to the disciples: "But who do you say that I am?" God has no grandchildren or stepchildren: each individual person must accept God as his own Heavenly Father. We cannot get by on the faith of our parents. We cannot regard God as a sort of Heavenly Uncle, or as simply an acquaintance, or even as a friend. It is only by acknowledging God as Father that we dare refer to Jesus as Brother, and then only in that sense. For Jesus is the Saviour, the Messiah, the Christ.

Our answer to the question is expressed by our response. As St. James wrote in the extract from his Letter used for the Second Reading: "Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith." Each one of us must find some means, some works, whereby we can express our faith.

How much does your religion cost you? Not simply in terms of money, but also in terms of energy and time and thought and prayer and worship? There is the measure of your faith!

If it is the occasional hour of a Sunday and the couple of dollars spared from the housekeeping money, there is the measure of your faith.

If it is the regular Sunday-by-Sunday worship; service on one roster or another; membership of some committee or organisation, a carefully-worked-out giving of a proportion of your income: there is the measure of your faith,

Our Lord called for a pretty high standard from His disciples. "If any want to become My followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me." And that means considerably more than left-overs, of time, talent and treasure that seems to be the extent to which some who profess and call themselves Christians are prepared to undertake.

There was an occasion when Jesus healed ten lepers - only one came back to express appreciation. And Jesus asked: "But where are the other nine?" How do you think He feels when we consider how crowded this church could and should be; how affluent this as a congregation and as a Parish could and should be; what could and should be done in outreach to the unconverted?

Hear again the challenge of our Lord: "If you would follow me - deny yourself; take up your cross; **be** my disciple; be positive in your response."

When the question was put: "Who do you say I am?", Peter glimpsed the vision of the reality of the Messiahship of Jesus: "You are the Messiah!" Since this affirmation expresses the Christian understanding of Jesus, we might have expected that it would be met with an enthusiastic and unambiguous endorsement from Jesus, and in St. Matthew's version that was what happened: "You are Peter, the Rock, and on this faith I will build my Church and the powers of death will not prevail against it." (16:17) But Mark, as we heard, has Jesus immediately swearing the disciples to silence about Himself. There was some reason why He was not ready to have Himself proclaimed as Messiah just yet. In fact "He began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." '

Here was a Christ who was to be rejected by every party, and to suffer greatly at their hands. Here was a Christ who would not be triumphantly and gloriously vindicated in this life at all. He would die in apparent weakness, in apparent defeat. No wonder the horrified Peter rejected this sort of Christ. For if Jesus went by that path, He might expect His followers to tread it too! If He really is the Messiah, any thought of that course must be wrong! The blistering severity of Jesus' reply is evidence enough that what is at stake is a matter of central importance: "He rebuked Peter and said: Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." To try to persuade Jesus to turn from the way He had outlined was to tempt Him to disobey the will of the Father, as Satan had done in the wilderness. The only way to attain true life is through trust in God and in obedience to His will: willingly accepting cost, loss, or injury in the cause of Christ and His Gospel. And refusing to spend all our energies in preserving, securing, and enriching our life in this world. "For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"

No one can pretend this is easy.. We are all afraid of pain and suffering and ashamed of seeming to be fools in the eyes of people who do not understand. We are all too ready to spend time and money on our own comforts and luxuries leaving the left-overs for God. But let us be aware that the standards of the world are frequently contrary to the will of God. If anyone prefers the standards of the world to the Christian standards to which we are called, can expect only rejection when the day of reckoning comes. *And come it will.*

Today's Gospel lays down pretty clearly and forthrightly what is the cost of discipleship. In today's society, that cost is becoming more and more apparent: it is NOT getting easier to be a disciple of Christ.

But in the long run – and life eternal is at stake – the crosses of this world are worth enduring. “Those who are ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.”

God grant that we may be enabled to keep our Baptismal promises to be true to Christ crucified, and never to be ashamed to confess our faith in Him.

Amen

"The disciples asked Jesus privately: 'Why could not we cast it out?' And he said to them: 'this kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer'." (Mark 9:29)

This incident, according to St. Mark, follows immediately on from the great event of the Transfiguration. What a let-down! Peter and James and John, together with Jesus, had just come back down the mountain after that incredible and awesome experience, and there was this crowd with the rest of the disciples and some kind of hurly-burly going on. Apparently the disciples had tried to heal the lad and had failed. And you can hear Jesus sigh: "O faithless generation How long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?" You can almost hear him say: "Will they never learn?" As He so often did, Jesus cross-questioned the father about his faith in his ability to heal, to drive out this demon causing the boy's mental problem. At first the man was a bit hesitant: "If you can do anything, have pity on us and help us." Jesus takes him up on it: "If you can!" What kind of faith statement is that? The father then cries out: "I believe: help my unbelief." The boy was then duly healed.

That is a good phrase to have in mind as we pray for someone or something important to us. As we know, we are not always granted the an answer which we seek to our prayers. There are good reasons for this which we do not often appreciate. Sometimes it may be lack of full belief: "I'll ask, but I can't really see it happening". Sometimes it may be that we are asking for something we just cannot have, like a child asking its mother for something it would be unwise of her to give. "You're too young", "too inexperienced"~ it wouldn't be helpful to others". It IS a problem when we believe as fully as we think we can be. It is not easy to take "No" for an answer, especially when we believe our cause is right and just. But if we have full belief we ought to be able to place the matter in our Lord's hands, recognise full picture, which we do not, and say: "Thy will be done" each time we say the Lord's Prayer.

And still we are slow to accept it There are many stories in the Bible where God has responded to the prayers of the faithful and the persistent in the way they asked. Jesus himself told parables urging us to be persistent, believing that if our cause is just, God will come to our aid. Many people approach prayer in this way, relying heavily and even naively on the single verse: "Ask and it shall be given", as if God is some kind of doting grandmother. But have all probably had the experience of not having our prayers answered in the way we want, and we are disappointed and even cross with God. We need to remember that we do not always or even often see things from God's perspective. Sometimes, although we might not see it straight away, God's reply is "Wait patiently in faith - the time is not yet ripe". Sometimes the thing we ask for has been marred by mankind's inhumanity to man, or what he has done to his environment, and God requires mankind to work through that. Sometimes the answer is just plain "No'- you're asking for the impossible". God sees the whole picture: we don't. And let's not forget that when Jesus prayed so fervently in the Garden of Gethsemane, when his sweat became "like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground" as St. Luke records,-his prayer was "Father if it be possible let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not my will but thine be done."

The answer, even to the Beloved Son "no!" Because the answer was No, our salvation was achieved - that was behind the Father's response. So we too must pray faithfully, hopefully, expectantly, always acknowledging "Not as I will, but as thou wilt."

But intercession, asking, pleading, is only one aspect of prayer, although most people tend to make it the most important, even perhaps the sole aspect. There is an acronym, the letters of which stand for aspects of prayer. The word is ACTS, and the letters stand for Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. As we pray,-:those various aspects should be included, at least to some degree, to keep our proper spiritual balance.

A is for Adoration "O come, let us adore him". Straightout, no-strings attached worship, because we know him as our Lord and Saviour.

C is for Confession. How dare we approach the Lord God Almighty, sinful, self-centred beings that we are! The fabulous thing is that as we face up to our faults and failings, and admit them, we are made clean, and forgiven, and acceptable.

T is for Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving for the knowledge that we can be forgiven, that the way to God is open to us, that the Holy Spirit is there to support, strengthen, and guide us.

And at last S for Supplication: placing before God all those needs and desires and heartaches and agonies and disillusionment and worries which have to be faced up to as we make our pilgrimage through life.

One last point about the acronym ACTS: action should be the outcome of our prayers. We now have to get on and do something about whatever it is that we've prayed about. We may not sit back smugly and say: "Well I've prayed to God about it, now it's up to him!" Even if it is so colossal a problem that we cannot hope to get near to it, like praying for peace in the Middle East, we can in our own little corner, with our own little candle of faith and courage burning, help maintain a Christian awareness and influence in our own community and country, which will eventually influence our own leaders and the leaders of the nations.

There are, as Jesus said, some things which can only be driven out by prayer. As His followers we must be faithful in prayerful service, adoring, confessing, thanking and supplicating. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are his, now and for ever.

AMEN