

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

3 September, 2006

1. **Sometimes the Church is accused of being hypocritical**, e.g. “ they say they love God and their neighbour as themselves but all they care about is looking after themselves” etc. Today’s gospel and NT reading give us an opportunity to consider this accusation.
2. **One of the problems the early Church faced was how much it should still follow the laws and customs** of the Jewish Food laws became an issue. The Jews had developed habits of cleanliness which were admirable for maintenance of health in a hot climate, we see it in kosher and the halal food of Muslims. Strict observance of these had become so central and ritualised in Jesus’ day that the reasons behind the laws had often become obscured. In (Mark 7. 1-8, 14-23) we see a situation where the disciples clearly flouted the current practice.
3. **Jesus challenged the insistence on ceremonial purity** and insisted it was not what a person touched or ate which defiled him but the evil things he contrived in his own heart. A horrifying list, no doubt though, one we could add to! He used the opportunity to teach about purity of heart as distinct from ritual purity.
4. **What do we make of this reading today?** We are not meant to dwell on the question of hand and pot washing but on “religion that is pure and undefiled before God” (James 1.17-27). What does it mean to be religious? Today we might find Jesus criticizing so many people who regard themselves as religious but whose hearts are still producing evil thoughts: the outward show of praise from popular churches whose leaders are involved in fraud, preaching about love from those who abuse others or are racist or exclusive, over-attention to ritual from those who do no good works; exclusive groups who will only mix with people of their own faith and so on.
5. **It is easy to criticize others from a distance** yet all of us fall into the trap of thinking that certain behaviours are ‘religious’ and therefore favoured by God when in fact what God requires is a purity of heart and words of integrity, words accompanied by actions which match them.

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost Year B
10 September, 2006

1. **Luther denounced James's letter** because he thought it lacked good theology. His concern was justification by faith not by good works. But James is an important part of our Bible because it rightly places our behaviour, and how we live our lives as Christians in focus. (James 2.1-10 (11-13) 14-17)
2. **Discrimination against people who are different from ourselves** is one of our basic human flaws. We see it in the different treatment of people because of their race, age, status, their money, where they live, their family and so on. James addresses this in his letter.
3. **Discrimination exists in most societies.** The Jews were very discriminatory against non-Jews, hence the background to Jesus' perhaps friendly, repartee with the gentile woman in Mark 7. 24-37. Though despised by Jews, the gentile woman had faith and Jesus' concern for her was wholehearted. Likewise he had regard for the man with a speech impediment, someone who would have been unwelcome and perhaps a source of ridicule in that society. James's comments show that discrimination against the poor was a problem in those days too. Partiality and favouritism were common.
4. **In recent decades our laws have been focused on abolishing discrimination** against women, the aged, the poor, the disabled, ethnic groups and so on. It has been hard work and some people have been irritated by what they see is political correctness. Nevertheless great strides have been made in relation to these groups of people.
5. **But there is a great way to go yet** before our society could be regarded as impartial and just. There is probably a good way for the Anglican Church to go before its behaviours are not discriminatory too. At a local level it is important for each congregation to examine its behaviour and ask, "Whom do we show favour to? Do we welcome people from all backgrounds? Do we value people of every age and gender? Do we offer our support to the whole town or only to Anglicans? We might find that James's words still challenge us today.

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost Year B
17 September, 2006

1. **'You can't buy your own salvation'** is a common expression of a deep theological concept which is woven through the writings of Paul. Justification is the action of God whereby on the basis of the work of Christ in forging sins through his death on the cross, declares sinners to be free from guilt, forgives their sins, and restores them to favour with God. Justification is entirely God's action and there is nothing we can do through good works to earn our own forgiveness and restoration.
2. **That does not mean that we don't do good works.** The debate about this obviously has been long-lasting. Paul and James both were concerned with the question of faith and works; people during the Reformation debated it hotly, largely because of heretical practices which had crept into the Church whereby you could buy an indulgence to obtain the forgiveness of sin. James summed up the position very well by saying that faith without works is dead. (James 2.18-26)
3. **We find favour with God first not by what we do** but by who we are. "God of mercy, help us to trust you" (Collect). Trust in God underlies our relationship with God before we actually 'do' anything. In the Gospel (Mark 8.27-38) we see the linking of several ideas: first the recognition of Jesus as the Messiah, second the understanding that messiahship involved suffering service, and thirdly that giving oneself to the service of others is life-giving. The words 'in simple trust ...' in hymn I(AHB 519) remind us that a response of trust is the first thing required of us.
4. **Following Jesus is an act of faith, an act of trust,** a sacrificial act where you let go of sinful desires and your own selfish will and submit yourself to follow Jesus in his life-giving, self-effacing work. Naturally its outcome will be good works, the work of reconciliation, of unconditional love, of forgiving and healing and restoring and caring and helping.
5. **We cannot follow Jesus and say** that all that matters is our worship and our relationship to God. That relationship is flawed and our worship and prayers are defective if they are not completed in action. *Thy will be done* only has meaning when our prayer turns into positive action to fulfil God's will.

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost Year B
24 September, 2006

1. **Over and over Jesus told the disciples that the way to glory** is through total giving of oneself, yet they failed to understand. We see in Mark 9.14-29 that they were still judging achievement and greatness by human not Kingdom standards .
2. **'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all'**. Jesus gave an example of this by placing a child in the central position among them. We know little about the treatment of children in Bible times. We know that much was expected of them; obedience and respect of parents were commanded; many worked e.g. tending sheep. But no doubt, as in many societies, they were often ignored, sometimes ill-treated, perhaps ill-fed, and not respected. They were insignificant in politics, religion and the social and economic life of the people.
3. **Jesus' treatment of children, of outcasts, the sick and women** showed us that he placed the insignificant, the unfortunate and the oppressed at the centre. How we treat these 'little ones' is a sign of the greatness of a society. Some people have gone overboard in our society in placing children at the centre of things. We see families where children's demands hold families to ransom, where obedience and respect of parents have been forgotten and children's wishes are paramount. This is not what Jesus was saying.
4. **Rather his concern is for the nature of relationships** whether adult or children's. The person who is truly great will follow Christ in his servant life, bringing people to wholeness and health, including the outcast, helping people to see the way, to hear things with understanding, and giving love and respect to even the most insignificant among us by society's standards. This may be at some personal cost to us. We might need to give up our place in the centre of things, forgo our need for praise and recognition, give up some of our own time. This kind of sacrificial life we will paradoxically find to be life-giving both to others and ourselves.
5. **These ideas challenge us as individuals and as a faith community.** How do we welcome children as if they were Jesus? And welfare recipients? And new immigrants or refugees? And retirees to our town? How we welcome and treat those who have no status in our Church will be a sign of our greatness.