# Morningside Sermon 10.30am 30/8/15

# Clean

*Psalm 45:1-2, 6-9; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23*

I’m sure most of us will remember that call from some relative, as we had been out and about as children; “dinner’s ready, come and wash your hands.” I’m left wondering what would have happened if Jesus had called that out to the 5,000 He fed! Cleanliness is next to godliness right enough.

We take the physical act of being clean for granted. A whole industry has grown up around cleaning products – for our hands and bodies; for our homes and work places. We make judgements about people by how clean, or otherwise, they are. Polish your shoes before an interview. Make sure your home is spick and span before guests arrive. Have some kind of routine to make sure that everything doesn’t build up and get on top of you when it comes to making sure things get done. People for centuries have rules and rhythms when it comes to cleaning. It matters for health and hygiene; it matters for orderliness. Cleanliness is how you tell whether or not someone is coping with life, and observing what society and tradition has dictated as the right thing to do.

Making judgements based on cleanliness is nothing new. In the Jewish religion in which Jesus grew up the differentiation between being clean and unclean mattered – for your religious and society obligations. Being clean enabled you to participate in the life of the community and play your part. Being unclean very often meant being shunned, or devalued, or pushed aside, or ignored. Not observing the rules and regulations about being clean marked you out as a rebel, and as someone who had little regard for holiness and the law of God. Both were seen to demand being clean. Both were seen as a comment on whether or not you were ‘right’ with God by obeying what society demanded in that day.

We might think that this kind of thinking is merely an historical detail, one of those idiosyncrasies from the past that belong to the past. Until we begin to look at some of the traditions and conventions and habits that we assume in our society today. It’s not so very long ago that what you wore to church, or to work, was much more strictly governed, not by law, but by tradition. The things that you did at certain times of the day were governed by tradition and habit. This is when you wash. This is when you do your shopping. This is when you work. This is when you rest and have time off. The social timetabling of our lives may be less obvious than a few years ago, but it is still only just beneath the surface. We know when somebody breaks cover, and abandons the rules.

It is what Jesus did. It’s not that He was against the traditions and the rules of His day. He knew that it was important to observe the patterns of faith and work in life, and He did Himself. But where He broke cover was by asking the question, ‘Why?’ Why do we do these things? If these things are supposed to show how clean we are in the eyes of God, or the society around us, how fit we are for holiness and faithfulness, then how does following these rules make that happen? If these traditions are the way we think God wants things done, why is this? And if, Jesus said, you are only following these traditions and patterns, about ritual cleanliness, about prayer, about how you relate to the people around you, because that is the done thing, and have not examined your motivation, then is God really all that bothered; is that really all God wants of you, simply obeying orders and following rules.

Jesus’ radical thought about cleanliness was that it wasn’t simply about following the rules and obeying the ritual so that the outside of things looked all right. Rather, it was to look inside, to the heart, to the mind, to the motivation to the will. Jesus argued that if your heart and mind aren’t right, if your heart and mind aren’t clean, then nothing else will be or can be.

Hypocrisy today remains the most commonly levelled charge against people who claim to have faith. If those people say they believe one thing, but do another, then what does that say about what they really believe? There is, of course, a smart answer to those who won’t join church because it is full of hypocrites: there’s always room for one more.

What people seems to be looking for, inside and outside the Church, is for authenticity. Do the fine words amount to fine actions? Does the Sunday belief work its way through the workaday week? Do we practise what we preach? Are we, clean on the outside of our lives, clean on the inside of our living?

This isn’t about making narrow-minded judgements about people’s lifestyles, but it is about looking at how people behave towards those around them, treat those around them, help those around them, and support those around them. Having clean hands is one thing, anyone can wash their hands; anyone can say what they believe and come to church. But having a clean heart, and working through what you believe in places where it is far from easy is quite another thing. But it is the thing that shows what your faith is really about.

“The tale is told of a very self-centred individual who became concerned about other people’s negative image of him. Finally he spoke to his minister, who proposed that he try, for one month, simply pretending to be a different person, one who cared deeply about the welfare of others. He was to live, in effect, as a hypocrite, pretending to be something he was not, to be a far better person then he actually was. By the end of those four weeks the generosity, concern and selflessness had become so captivating that he found he was no longer pretending. Maybe hypocrisy has something to be said for it after all!”[[1]](#endnote-1)

Jesus gets to the core of the problem, the core of merely keeping up appearances and doing what we think is right for the sake of it, by challenging each one of us to look on the inside. He says it’s not the things on the outside of life that only cause our bad actions or bad practice; it’s what comes from the inside. The problem with our wrong-doing find their roots in our hearts and minds, and souls. Appearances, external factors, conditions and influences count for little if our hearts are not clean and our minds are not gracious. As Robert Burns put it:

*“The heart ay’s the part ay*

*That makes us right or wrang.”[[2]](#endnote-2)*

Pure or impure? Clean or unclean? It’s not a matter of ritual observance or of outward appearance, but of what is going on deep inside each person, that works out into our behaviour. God does not want mere rule-keepers; God wants life-changers and grace-livers and love-givers.

Our challenge today is to recognise how we, like the Pharisees, misinterpret what is important to God. Do we look at the dirty hands and clothes of our homeless brothers and sisters and think ourselves, “I’d rather not sit beside them?” Do we hear a crying baby during worship and think to ourselves, or even whisper to our neighbours, “Children should not be allowed in worship.” Do we watch a gay couple join the church and think, “They’re not welcome here?” Do we watch migrants trying to board lorries and trains and think, “They’re only coming here to get on to the benefit system.” Do we peer, via the television cameras, into the back of a truck that contained seventy desperate Syrians and think, “Why didn’t they stay at home?”

Our reaction to the plight of others. Our reaction to the needs of others. Our decision to do something, however small, to make life better, safer, happier, more welcoming – that is what Jesus is driving at when He talks about what makes people really clean in the eyes of God. Keep the rules, absolutely, but work out what the implications of those rules, those aspirations are to the way you choose to live your life.

Jesus speaks not to make us take a guilt trip, but to help us take a reality check. Your hands may very well be clean, you might be the shiniest person in your pew, but Jesus asks you this morning, how’s your heart; how’s your mind; how’s your mouth; how’s your soul?

And rather than judging us, Jesus does not leave it at that. He gets alongside us, to help us, and encourage us, so that we might clean up our act, inside and out, and be more like Him.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

**Amen**

1. Feasting on the Gospels: Mark, p205 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Robert Burns, Epistle to Davie [↑](#endnote-ref-2)