

James 1 v17-27
Mark 7 v1-8, 14-15, 21-23

It has been said that tradition is listening to the voice of the dead, a rejection of the tyranny of the present and a reminder that we should not neglect the opinion of the past simply because it is not the view of the moment. In a society that tries to include the opinions of anyone, regardless of where they were born, surely, we should not exclude anyone just because they are no longer with us?

In many religions and cultures, tradition is the cornerstone, the foundation on which they build, if they build at all.

We looked, last week on the book of Joshua, of how tradition and the story of how the Israelites got to the promised land. Tradition can be a source of good, a link to the past, a guide for the present and a foundation stone for the future.

Tradition, if used correctly can bring many benefits. However, even with the best of intentions, those things that were intended to be merely guidelines, can become hard and fast rules. What was intended to set us free, now ensnares us.

In 1900, the Bayer Company introduced the first aspirin in water-soluble tablets. This was the 1st medication to be sold in this form and the product cut the operating costs in half. In 1914, Bayer began placing cotton in their bottles to minimize breakage of the tablets during shipment from the factory to the chemists. Then in the mid 1980's, Bayer began coating its aspirins with a Toleraid micro coating. This coating helped keep the tablet intact and less susceptible to breakage. It wasn't until January 1999, after 4 and half years of testing and discussions that Bayer decided to get rid of the cotton wad in some of its aspirin formulas. An 85-year-old tradition ended, some 15 years after it became obsolete. Bayer concluded that there wasn't any reason to keep the cotton except tradition. Though it was hard to get out, some customers actually missed the cotton balls. They reminded some customers of their childhood; they were familiar things that had always been there.

There is a difference between tradition and traditionalism. Tradition is the living faith of those now dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of those still living. Our passage from Mark today deals with these issues. Issues that are as relevant today as when they were first discussed all those years ago.

Jesus and the religious leaders frequently had fairly heated discussions. The passage begins with the Pharisees and scribes criticizing disciples for eating without washing their hands. They'd broken religious rules again. Rules that in themselves were useful and practical; but which like many a good thing, could become power tools of oppression in the wrong hands.

The focus of this conversation between Jesus and the religious leaders is discipleship, being a follower, being obedient to God as opposed to merely observing the rules of a religion. It's an age-old issue. How do we know when we're doing the right thing? How do we know when we're being how God wants us to be? How can we keep check on ourselves?

These questions run through the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. The Hebrew Scriptures emphasize the role of the Torah or law as the plumb line for judging how we live. This Law focuses on the Ten Commandments. These are God's gift for

creating a people, a society which has justice, mercy, dignity and shalom at its heart. James knew this.

Did you notice his mention of widows and orphans? Well, widows and orphans in the communities of Palestine and Israel were the most vulnerable. It was a male dominated and hierarchical society.

A society that if women and children who did not have the protection and support care and authority of a man, in other words, widows and orphans, found themselves unprotected, were marginalized and condemned to poverty and servitude.

The scribes, the Pharisees and Jesus agreed that the Law was important. Where they disagreed was about how the law was helpful to living and loving. The Ten Commandments are pretty general. Just think about keeping the Sabbath holy. It was controversial then, as it is now. - Compare what you do on a Sunday today with what you wouldn't have done 40 or 50 years ago.

The law, it could be said, is an expression of God's personality lived in the community. Yet, in Jesus' day, the religious leaders had developed a system of does and don'ts for the details of living. There were over 600 don'ts and over 300 does. In general, the scribes and Pharisee's believed they'd worked out a system to help people live good and just lives [and that included washing hands before eating]. Jesus however, trusted people to discover how to live, by helping them to see what God is like. This is not to say the law is unimportant.

If we ignored the canon of scripture we call the Old Testament, we are in danger of throwing out the baby with the bath water. In Deuteronomy, there is a great celebration of the law and all it means to the people of Israel. Jesus too, delighted in the Law. He spoke about not altering one part of it. And yet, it angered him when he saw how it was used to damage people and communities.

The damage to people was real. Jesus challenged the religious leaders because he challenged their ideas that women, sick people, prostitutes, foreigners, and children were unclean.

Think of how he felt, the dismay he must have felt where the Law was deemed to prevent someone from being loved on a Sabbath, or from eating on a Sabbath, or from helping a stranger in desperate need on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho. Strict adherence to the rules created a community where appearance was important, where the outward expression of religion replaced the inward delight in discovering what God is like. The net result was the creation of oppression.

"You abandon the commandments of God and hold to human tradition." Allowing for the passage of 2,000 years, these are still very challenging words.

Jesus places the commandments of God and human tradition in contrast one with another.

He asks us whether we live a religious system or whether we're open to a surprising and inclusive God. The challenge is at once both individual and communal.

A question we could all ask ourselves is, "Do I hold onto human tradition in such a way that I am abandoning the commandments of God?" It's a tough question, no bones about it. Remember how stunned the disciples were at how seriously Jesus talked with women. Peter was taken aback at the thought of Jesus dying.

Remember "Get thee behind me Satan!" Also, in the book of Acts, Peter learned that his view of what was clean and unclean was wrong. They were, and we are challenged to unlearn the deep "religious" prejudices lurking within. The question we should ask ourselves is, "Am I big enough to feel that God is bigger than me?" Prejudices, our hard and fast views can mar our journey towards God. Prejudices are our refusal to explore scripture, to pray, to discuss with others about God, our refusal to learn from other people's insights. Our failure to take on board new hymns, new ways of worship, new loving, allows "religion" to close us from God. Not because different and new can be better, but because different and new can open thinking and feeling that have become stagnant. "You abandon the commandments of God and hold to human tradition."

As for the Christian Church, it's in for a time of change. For some this will be exciting, for others perhaps viewed with trepidation. Maybe there are some aspects of this in our own fellowship here too. It does the church in general good to remember that church hasn't always been in Victorian buildings; Jesus never sang Crimond, or Cym Rhondda or even Jerusalem.

Flowers haven't always been in that place, organs are more modern than guitars! Strange but true. Pastoral care is the ministry of the congregation not just the job of a minister. You know there is a feeling that some subjects are too indelicate for discussion.

How can we care for the widow and orphan and so recognize those in our community marginalized often because of religiosity? The widows and the orphans of today are unfortunately plentiful, even in our wealthy country.

The foreigner seeking legitimate asylum, the incomer not speaking our language, the single parent not fitting into the neat family model, the single person not fitting into any model. These are big challenges we and the church in general face today. Can we be satisfied merely with the notion of rebuilding a middle eastern country, without asking about arms exportation or oil interests, without asking if it a factor in the present troubles? How can we love our neighbour and refuse to demonstrate fair trade?

"You abandon the commandments of God and hold to human tradition."

Jesus doesn't want our human traditions [especially when they sink to prejudice and fundamentalism], to replace the mystery and adventure of God.

Jesus objected to the notion of following God being achieved by following a rulebook and keeping oneself safe. It is who and how we love and demonstrate a justice which ever so slightly gets near to reflecting the inclusive justice and love of God! If religion is about being nice, being right and keeping the rules, then Jesus and therefore God can do without it!

Amen.