

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Ordinary 22)
01-09-2024
St Cuthbert's Anglican Church – Tweed Heads

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| Song of Songs 2: 8-13 | Memories of courtship The Lover calls his beautiful one |
| Psalms 45: 1-2, 6-9 | A poem to the King |
| James 1: 17-27 | Listening and doing – tame the Tongue |
| Mark 7: 1-8, 14-23 | Jesus teaches about inner purity What comes out of the mouth defiles not what goes in. |

Introduction

Today we hear Jesus talking to the Pharisees about food laws, but it could have been any of the other laws. In fact, the bit we skipped out in verses 9-13 was about one of the commandments to honour your parents.

At the centre of Jesus' message today is not a particular Jewish law, but rather what is in our hearts as we seek to keep God's laws.

The reading from James today really fits in well with the gospel, and I'd like to focus on these two readings in our talk today. So let us now look at, what it might mean, and what it might look like for us to be keeping God's laws.

James

Let's begin by looking at the reading from the letter of James that we have listened to today.

The letter of James is often considered as a "How to" book on Christian living. The main idea James is trying to get across to his readers is that genuine faith will transform lives and inevitably produce good deeds. We will be hearing from the letter of James in the lectionary readings for the next five weeks.

In one of my bibles this portion of scripture is given the subtitle, "Listening and Doing". We see that James is very focused on action. James wants his readers to know that the word of God in Jesus, is not just something to be accepted intellectually, but also something to be lived into. In verse 22 we hear these words:-

"But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves."

The great reformer Martin Luther, referred to the Letter of James as, "The Epistle of Straw". This was because it focused on Christian behaviour. Luther's own faith had been transformed by his reading of Paul's letter to the

Romans, and its emphasis on salvation by God's grace through faith. He realized that it wasn't what he did that would give him the assurance of forgiveness and eternal life with God, but rather, it was by accepting what Jesus had done for him on the cross and in the resurrection.

The two however are not opposed, but rather complimentary. If we are saved by grace through faith, then we are called to respond to this faith with our lives. For James knowing God in Jesus, should mean we will want to keep God's laws and the result of this will be shown in Christian action.

Let's look at some examples from the reading:-

In verse 19 we hear these words,
"let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak"

This is a challenge for us in the world we live in today. The emphasis on getting what you "want" and getting what you "deserve", seems to be a dominant theme. With the recent phenomenon of social media, we may also want to add "slow to type". Conflicts and disagreements can be avoided by trying to have conversations with others, and if we don't agree, not just putting something on social media, or firing off an aggressive email.

As Christians we are called to listen to what others have to say, and take the viewpoints of others into account. I recall as a child being told that I had two ears and only one mouth, and this meant it was more important to listen, before you spoke. And we should listen because we matter to one another.

In verse 27 we hear these words, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

This is also a challenge before us today because there are so many people and so many causes that are worthy of support. We need to work out how we can care for others in the context of our lives.

In our Local context here at St Cuthberts, we support the Tweed Coast Christian Education Association, we support Fred's Place and Agape, and we support a number of Mission Agencies further afield, including the Emmanuel Anglican Church in Nigeria. We should be doing these things, not out of duty, but as a response to the love and forgiveness we have received from God.

God has made us for good, and we do good things in response to what God has done for us in Jesus.

Mark's Gospel

Let us now turn to the reading from Mark's Gospel. In it we hear Jesus accusing the Pharisee's of hypocrisy.

Jesus lets them know that what makes you unclean is not what goes in, but what comes out of your mouth. What goes in only goes to the stomach and is then processed. What goes out comes from the heart. Jesus wasn't concerned about keeping man made rules for the sake of keeping the rules, but rather ensuring that what was meant by the intent of the rules was upheld.

Jesus lists a number of evil intentions that can come from our heart and can defile us. We see from this that Jesus is very concerned about our inner purity. Jesus wants us to obey God's laws so that we don't fall into the trap of these evil intentions that can come from our hearts.

Jesus doesn't make these comments to degrade the law, but rather Jesus looks at it from a higher plane. We don't keep laws for the sake of keeping them, but rather to do God's will.

Purpose of God's Laws

The purpose of God's Laws is to live in harmony with God, and to live in harmony with our fellow human beings.

This is at the heart of the ten commandments, and at the heart of greatest commandment given by Jesus:-

²⁹ Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰ you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' ³¹ The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:29-31)

We are called to live by God's laws.

If we accept what Jesus did for us, in his life, death and resurrection, and we know the benefits of this, then it follows that our hearts should seek to do his will. God's Laws are not there to bind us up, but rather to enable us to live free and fulfilled lives.

Conclusion

Jesus warns us for our own benefit.

We hear similar warnings to the Pharisee's in Matthew's Gospel (23:23). Jesus denounces them for tithing spices, but neglecting the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness.

As we go about our lives this week, I pray that we will seek to do the right thing, and that we will seek to keep God's laws.

But that we will also understand, that what we are doing is not just about rules for rules sake, but rather about justice, about mercy and about faithfulness. Amen.