

Pentecost +13
3/09/2006

Mark the Evangelist

Song of Solomon 2:8-13
Psalm 45
James 1:17-27
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

...this people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me...

The Guru's Cat. Each time the guru sat for prayer with his students the Ashram cat would come in and distract them. He ordered the students to tie up the cat at the time for prayer.

After the guru died the cat continued to be tied during prayer time. And when the cat died, another one was brought to the ashram to make sure that each prayer time the guru's orders were faithfully observed.

Centuries passed and the scholarly disciples of the guru wrote learned dissertations on the liturgical significance of tying up a cat while the ashram was at prayer.

It is easy to laugh at such a story but the habit of giving status to a rule that defiles the spirit of the activity in question affects us all at some time or another. A minister of a denomination that Baptizes by immersion told me of an occasion when he Baptised a convert and then had to face a challenge from one of his Elders who had noticed that not all the woman's head had gone under the water.

In Mark the religious authorities challenged Jesus because his disciples were not observing the rules of ritual purity. This was not about hygiene. It was about ritualised observances connected to the holiness code. The question was sincere. Ritual purity mattered to the Scribes and Pharisees but they had fallen into observing something that would allow them to feel they had achieved excessive compliance with the statutes of God. The observances were not part of the central body of canon law. They were an oral tradition of customs that had achieved elevated authority. By not observing these customs the disciples of Jesus gave the impression holiness did not matter. But Jesus' reply shows that he and his followers sought a different kind of holiness, one that did not subvert or defile the worship of God at the centre. He quoted Isaiah 29:13 to make the point.

*This people honours me with their lips
but their heart is far from me;
In vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.
You abandon the commandment of God
and hold to human tradition.*

Jesus does not call for an abandonment of tradition. Jesus gives value to the intention of the Law but denounces its subordination to the tradition of interpretation. It is not just that this is the wrong priority. This obsessive concern with custom and peccadilloes fosters a legalistic attitude to life, which is self-justifying and dislodges the heart's focus

on God. The first displacement leads to missing the mark - which in theological terms is sin. Jesus says that all defilement comes from the heart. Therefore the heart that is not set on God is sure to lead to a life that expresses what is not God's will. Here Mark touches on the prophetic and ethical purpose of the Law, which is to allow people to live freely in the grace of God.

This is a hard text for traditionalists, but at the same time it does not recommend lawlessness, lack of discipline, or promote innovation for its own sake. When it comes to traditions of all kinds there is a danger that what begins as a helpful means of staying focussed on God can soon become an end in itself. In his day Calvin warned people that innovation can be the source of many stultifying traditions. He said of the Catholics "They are always inventing new forms of worship." And yet Calvin and his heirs proved to be just as capable of innovations that soon became stultifying traditions. As we explore the whole round of symbols associated with worship in this sanctuary, in our efforts to be a more effective living, faithful, community, the question to keep in view is: what is vital?

What is vital is what helps us focus our hearts on God. And what emerges from the broader context of Mark, and James, is that hearts focussed on God are revealed in lives that are noticeable for the justice and charity they demonstrate towards others, rather than their ritual or doctrinal perfection. This is not a new moralism. It flows from what we find in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament: everything we have begins because of God's gracious move towards us. Because of God's gifts, it is possible to live for God and for others without effort, but not without discipline.

Part of the clue to understanding what Jesus is driving at in Mark may be found by reflecting on the link with Song of Solomon. Here we have eight chapters of passionate and erotic verse in which a delicate mood of love and devotion is sustained between a man and a woman. Jewish and Christian tradition accepts this book as dealing with human sexual love, but also treats it as analogous of the relationship between God and the people, Christ and the church. There are no prescriptions in such a relationship, only a deep and overflowing love freely expressed between the parties. If we can grasp this, we are some of the way towards understanding that what is vital is to live in the loving wisdom of God. The rules and rituals are meant assist, not subvert this purpose.

We cannot legislate for love, we cannot change a person's heart by rituals or traditions, but properly enacted and observed good laws and rituals, beliefs and statues may make the link between love and justice, and help distinguish between what is important and what is not. This is true in faith, and in the best of community life.

The African American theologian Kate Canon grew up in the early years of the civil rights movement. As a schoolgirl she recalls standing tall, crossing her heart and pledging allegiance to the flag, reciting the Lord's Prayer, quoting the Beatitudes and answering questions from the Lutheran Catechism. But she lived in a world of structured discrimination against coloured people. She had to travel home from school at the back of the bus, drink at water fountains reserved for people of colour, was unable to play in the park, swim in public swimming pools, or even to sign up for a state wide spelling contest. This regime of injustice was changed because people like Martin Luther King Jnr saw the inconsistency between law as it was stated and law as it was lived, and said:

It may be true that the law can't make a man love me, but it can keep him from lynching me... Judicial decrees may not change the heart but they can restrain the heartless... What is needed is the recognition that power without love is reckless and abusive, and that love without power is sentimental and anaemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.

Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social condition that cripples them is dry as dust religion.

I fancy King would have had something to say about the recent statement that: "Anyone left in southern Lebanon will be treated as a friend of Hezbollah". This was an overt example of a rule that was entirely self-serving, and abrogated all sense of humanity and divinity grounded in love.

Those of us who meet to hear the Word and celebrate it in sacrament and song must always remember that of itself it is not the main purpose for being here. These things are intended to take us back to the centre and enable us to find the resource which allows us to correct everything that stands against love, in our own lives and the life of the world.