

*Sunday 2 September – Quarterly Communion*

*Readings:* Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23; James 1:17-27

"You are what you eat" - we are very aware of the importance of eating healthy food - because we are becoming aware of the harm that unhealthy food does to us. So out with the fry-ups and too many fizzy drinks, no more cream and butter on everything. Except occasionally for special treats, just now and then. And no more sharing glasses and cups and drink bottles - it's hard to convince my daughter that if I have a sip of her drink she won't immediately come down with a deadly disease!

And good hand washing practices, we are reminded, are at the heart of any disease-prevention regime. Remember when swine flu hit a couple of years ago and even those of us who can be a bit slack about these things made sure we washed our hands, and we thought about whether shaking hands at the door of the church was a healthy practice?

The scribes and Pharisees watched the way that Jesus' disciples were eating without washing their hands. But the reaction of the scribes and Pharisees to what Jesus' disciples were doing did not come from a concern for hygiene, or at least not for their physical hygiene as we would understand it.

The Pharisees' concern was for spiritual hygiene, whether or not the disciples were following the approved procedures that made them fit to worship God, fit to be part of God's people.

The traditions of the elders laid down the appropriate rituals of washing that should be followed if people wished to keep themselves holy, dedicated to God, set apart for God's use.

Mark says these scribes and Pharisees came from Jerusalem - Jerusalem where the Temple was, Jerusalem where the religious establishment sought to maintain the distinctiveness of the Jewish nation as God's people, set apart and dedicated for the service of God.

The traditions of the elders laid out the way that people could keep themselves separate from anything that would contaminate them, make them unclean, unfit for this holy purpose, unfit to come into God's presence.

The intention had been to bring people close to God. But in Jesus, God had come close to the people, right into their midst. In Jesus God had come to dwell with God's people, God had moved into the neighbourhood<sup>1</sup>. And with Jesus the process of contamination was reversed. Nothing unclean, nothing common, nothing unfit could defile Jesus' holiness.

Jesus touched blind eyes and withered limbs - and healed them.

Jesus touched lepers - and made them clean.

Jesus touched dead people - and restored them to life.

Rather than Jesus being contaminated by these 'unclean' people, he was able to infect them with his holiness, with his wholeness, with his energy, with his life. People were saved, restored, made clean, brought to new life when they came into contact with Jesus.

James says: "Every generous act of giving, every perfect gift, is from above"<sup>2</sup>

That's what we see in Jesus, the gracious giving of God, given in love, infecting the whole world.

I have read a story about a woman who had been reasonably happily married, and who worked very hard to please her husband. He was not an easy man to please, but she loved him, and she was happy to put in the effort to make him happy. Over the years, in order to make sure that she didn't forget any of things he asked her to do, or any of the things that pleased him, she wrote herself a list. Each day, she would check her list and make sure that she had done all she could to make him happy. After many years of marriage, quite a happy marriage, the man died, and some time later, the woman found love with another man.

It too was a happy marriage, and often the woman thought how fortunate she was to have been blessed with two good marriages.... ..then one day, when she was looking for something in the back of a drawer, she found one of the lists she had written, the list of things to do to please her first husband. And suddenly, as she read what was written on the list, the things she had worked so hard to remember, she realised that she didn't need to write lists for her new husband. It wasn't that she didn't love him. It wasn't that she didn't want to do what pleased him. But she realised that now she was doing all the things that she had written on

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<sup>1</sup> John 1:14 (*The Message*)

<sup>2</sup> James 1:17

the old list - but doing them without have to think about them, without having to work hard to remember them. She loved this man and she knew he loved her. These acts of love simply flowed from her heart.

When we realise how much God loves us, when we realise that we receive from God every generous act of giving, every perfect gift, when our hearts have been captured by the grace and love of God, we can respond to God from our hearts.

James speaks of the word of truth that God has planted in our hearts.<sup>3</sup> Eugene Peterson translates it like this: Let our gardener, God, landscape you with the word, making a salvation-garden in your life.

When the word of truth is planted, good things will grow, naturally.

The first word of truth about God is that God loves us - and that is the word that has power to change us, to produce a flourishing productive garden where before there were rank weeds.

Jesus spoke about those weeds when he warned his listeners that what defiles a person, what makes them unclean, what cuts them off from God, is not what they eat or what they touch.<sup>4</sup> But the evil that comes out from a person, comes out from the heart, from those things that are our focus, those things that drive us.

Om that list of bad things, there's the ones we recognise as really bad - theft, murder, sex without faithfulness or commitment - and then there's the ones that we like to think are 'just human nature' - slander, pride, foolishness.

But all these flow out of the heart of our living, the drivers of our lives, the heart of our character..

But who can change the human heart?

Only God. 'Create in me a clean heart O God, and renew a right spirit within me"<sup>5</sup>

When the word of truth, the truth of God's love for us, flourishes in our hearts, becoming the driver of our actions, the focus of our lives, then our hearts are changed within us.

God has given us every good gift, and above all God has given us Jesus, the love of God made flesh.

And Jesus continues to infect us with the power of his love which makes us clean, makes us holy, belonging to God, being like God.

When we come to the Lord's Table, we receive bread and wine and take them into our bodies.

Jesus reminds us today that what goes into our bodies cannot defile them.

But here, we receive the life of God, the love of God, in bread and wine.

Here we receive God's good and perfect gift, given to us in Jesus.

Here we receive God's transforming power to make us new and to make the whole world new.

Here God comes in Jesus, and in bread and wine, to change our hearts, to fill our lives.

As we receive these gifts of God, may we be cleansed and filled with the love of God.

And as we leave this table, may the power of that love refocus all our living, our speaking, our listening and our actions.

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3 James 1:18

4 Mark 7:15

5 Psalm 51:1