

Matthew 15 A Hand-Washing Tale

Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ²‘Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.’ ³He answered them, ‘And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴For God said, “Honour your father and your mother,” and, “Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.” ⁵But you say that whoever tells father or mother, “Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God”, then that person need not honour the father. ⁶So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God. ⁷You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:

*⁸ “This people honours me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
⁹ in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.” ’*

10 Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, ‘Listen and understand: ¹¹it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.’ ¹²Then the disciples approached and said to him, ‘Do you know that the Pharisees took offence when they heard what you said?’ ¹³He answered, ‘Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.’

Well, they wouldn't get away with it today!! Not washing hands is now as unthinkable as not taking off your shoes when you go into a Norwegian's house. Of course this was long, long, long before the trials of today and global infectious diseases. It's a bit of fun to hear of the disciples not washing their hands against the context of our present and necessary preoccupation with making our mitts clean and healthy but as an example of how to make a big story out of a little one it has a lot going for it.

The Pharisees come out all the way from Jerusalem just to pick a fight. This was no casual encounter but a 'let's go and find the troublesome rabbi' expedition. They went mob-handed. They went out fighting and prepared. They may even have thought that this argument was more water tight than their last one (Matthew 12, 'why do your disciples eat on the Sabbath?' – presumably it took them a week to fathom out the next bit, eating on the Sabbath then not washing hands before they eat, thinking backwards they were good at, well, better than thinking forwards at least).

Jesus comes out fighting too, 'OK, if you want to talk about breaking commandments, let's have a look at some of the ones you Pharisees break...' And here is a lesson for us today in our c-virus ridden time. Caring for those who have cared for us, our parents, our elders, our weak and frail and vulnerable. These are the commandments of God we should be keeping. Don't look at the petty stuff, look at the big stuff. C-virus is not about washing hands but about caring for the community at large to stop infection spreading – look at the bigger picture.

Hierarchical institutions, such as the Pharisees belonged to, are often concerned with upholding their man-made laws to maintain the position of those in charge in the institution. Power is a heady drug and the Pharisees were trying to enforce their power on Jesus. But Jesus is no fool and no mean power either. They were trounced, as so often they are in the Gospels and small wonder they wanted Christ dead. Our own Church history sometimes reads like a power-grab story with the Church making rules where God's grace would be.

In a complete upending of the dynamics of this story, where the Pharisees had sought to get the crowd on their side (how daft could they be? They'd only manage that at the rabble-rousing crowd scene with Jesus and Barabbas) Jesus turns directly to the crowd and, in the sight and hearing of the self-righteous Pharisees, tells the crowd that what the Pharisees teach is *Wrong*, capital W. 'Red faced' doesn't begin to describe how the Pharisees must have looked, puce with rage, white with anger, black with loathing, green with envy, a whole rainbow of colourful language is available here!

It's what comes out of the mouth that defiles, makes dirty, impure, unacceptable. When we speak ill of the living, when we fail to help those threatened and weakened by circumstance, that is when we break the 2 salient commandments of God – Love the Lord your God, and then, love your neighbour as yourself.

The disciples were worried about the reaction of the Pharisees to the way that Jesus humiliated them. 'Do you know that the Pharisees took offence when they heard what you said?' they say to Jesus, as if He didn't realize He'd only gone and upset The Pharisees, like, the powerful people, the top set, the ruling clerics, the men who knew where they lived and had boys to send round??? Jesus' reaction is amazing when you hear it for what it is. 'So what? They are blind people leading blind people. If they all fall into the pit, it will be no loss.' This isn't the stereotypical Jesus of compassion and gentleness fame but a Jesus who is sharp to the point of caustic and damning almost with judgment of the Pharisees behaviour. Some scholars would argue that this is evidence of Matthew's anti-Pharisee attitude. If it makes you feel more comfortable to attribute Jesus' attitude to Matthew, think why that should be. How would our behaviour stand up to such scrutiny? To what are we blind? About what are we sure to the point where we challenge even God who tells us different? Let's start with 'love your enemy' and see how far we get. We have examples enough of this not happening in our midst without need to go outside the Body of Christ.

'Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desire known and from whom no secrets are hidden' has to be one of the scariest opening sentences in the whole of the liturgy. Thank God for the grace of the Holy Spirit to cleanse the *thoughts* of our *hearts*.