

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH TRINITY 14 WEEK 22 YEAR B 2 SEPTEMBER 2018

A person was talking things over with a priest. “Tell me,” said the priest, “Are you troubled by impure thoughts?” “No,” came the answer. “I quite enjoy them.” In today’s gospel Jesus lists some of the evil intentions coming from the human heart: fornication, theft, murder and so on. How should we understand his words?

Certainly Jesus is telling us that what goes on inside us is important and some of that is evil. We are creatures in need of redemption, being forgiven and brought into a state of goodness. But it is possible to get so hung up over our inner states that any energy we have for doing good is wasted as we focus on ourselves. I remember hearing the present Archbishop of York, John Sentamu, talking about a nun who regularly confessed to him her obsession with a particular priest. No identifying details were given, so I think the seal of the confessional was maintained. Eventually John (I don’t think he was yet a bishop) told her to have some hanky-panky with the priest so she would have something to confess. Sadly I don’t know whether the priest was aware of all this, or what happened.

There may be some people who reach what is called ‘complete sanctification’ in this life, their desires and actions being completely holy. John Wesley thought it was possible, and it’s what the catholic view of sainthood is. But most of us are aware of a mixture of good and evil inside. What matters is what we actually do, how what is inside us manifests itself. Jesus’ list of evil intentions is in fact a list of external sins, almost all involving other people. Murder involves another person, as does envy. You can’t commit adultery on your own, and so on. Having a mixture inside reminds me of the view of one of my teachers at theological college, who was chaplain at a psychiatric hospital. We’d been discussing the various disorders: neurosis, psychosis, depression, obsession, paranoia and so on. He reckoned it was reasonable to assume that each of us had all of these disorders – but in most of us they are in balance, so we function in a fairly sane manner. It’s OK to check you’ve locked the car; if you check it five times you have a problem, and so do people around you. Our actions express what is going on within.

Jesus makes two points in particular in today’s gospel. We’re not helped by some verses being missed out in our appointed reading, but here we go. The first point is that ceremonial washings do not make a person clean – acceptable to God and the community. These washings were part of the ‘tradition of the elders’: not specified in the Jewish law, but attempts by rabbis to apply the law to everyday life. We’d like the explanation to be that of course washing one’s skin won’t bring about

an internal change, but the reason Jesus gives is that this practice is a human invention, often used to get round a proper observance of the law. Though when we remember that the first commandment is, 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart...', we can see that Jesus is implying that what goes on inside is what matters. The second point is that, since evil is already present inside people, eating food considered unclean, like pork, won't make a person unclean. In verse 15 Jesus says 'there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile...'

Over the last three Sundays, going through the bread of life teaching in S. John's gospel, we've seen how revolutionary Jesus' teaching was. Today continues that theme. Jesus tells his hearers that things they've considered essential – dietary rules and daily ceremonies – are actually of no value. He points them to what they are like inside – where their hearts are – and how that will affect what they are like outside: what they do.

Can we change inwardly? Can we find a unity of being, so that we desire and do what is right? I'm sure the first step is to acknowledge there are different impulses within ourselves, as I've said earlier. Today's gospel reading doesn't give us any guidance on how we should then change, though there is clear teaching elsewhere in S. Mark's gospel. Jesus tells his hearers to 'Repent and believe the gospel.' He says, 'Follow me.' And in the parable of the Sower he wants us to be the good soil in which the seed, the word that he speaks, can grow. This theme of the word, the Christian gospel, stands out in today's New Testament reading from the letter of S. James. It occurs four times in the passage. God has given us birth by the word of truth. We are to welcome with meekness the implanted word. And the last two occurrences urge us to be doers of the word, not merely hearers: again, the unity between what we've accepted internally and how it shows itself in our lives.

The gospel therefore contains the promise that change is possible, so fundamental that it can be described as a birth. It's not something we achieve but something we accept. It turns us away from a preoccupation with self. It turns us away from the qualities Jesus lists which are destructive of our relationships with others. It inspires us to share God's love with others, true religion reaching out to a world in need.

Law in Deut not same as trad of elders. Impure thoughts. Can get hung up over our inner states. Jesus observing that external acts come from internal impulses. We need healing within – outer observances cannot do this. Focus is the remedy rather than the condition. Fits in with eg Sermon on Mount - righteousness exceed scribes and pharisees; be good in secret. Made clean by the word I speak to you.