

Not Quite Kosher!

Deuteronomy 4^{1-2,6-9}; Psalm 15; James 1^{17-end}; Mark 7^{1-8,14-15,21-23}

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 unstated by the world. [James 1²⁷]

Last week I ended the sermon with the questions - will you stand? That seems to have caused a bit of a stir and, having thought about it, a number of people felt that had wanted to stand as a declaration of their faith.

The readings for today follow that up very well - as we return to Mark's Gospel (having had our excursion into John's Gospel and Jesus as the **bread of life**) we get back on track with two basic questions:

1. What is your faith?
2. What difference does your faith make to you?

From the readings today:

The Psalmist has asked the basic question - who can be in God's presence for worship? The answer is simple: **those who walk blamelessly and do what is right.**

The author of Deuteronomy asks the question about who benefits from God (especially as they were thinking about entering the Promised Land)? For God to be near us and for God to listen to us all that is required is that we observe the commandments - **you must neither add anything to what I command you nor take anything from it.**

All this sounds straightforward - it just needs to be done.

But then we get to the Gospel and Jesus disciples seem to be breaking the rules!

- ✦ A group of theologians had made the 50 mile journey from Jerusalem to Galilee to find out about Jesus - but then they get distracted because Jesus' disciples hadn't washed their hands properly. It wasn't anything to do with hygiene but the religious rules that had been invented. The disciples weren't quite Kosher!
- ✦ The expectation was that Jesus would, as a Rabbi, support the theologians - their set of rules was still evolving and would in 150 years be set on paper as the Mishnah.
- ✦ Mark is at pains to point out that rules existed for washing everything, even to special rules about **copper kettles!**
- ✦ So the question **why do your disciples not live according to the traditions of the elders** seems perfectly reasonable.

- ✦ I don't suppose that they were expecting that Jesus would be quite so violent with them. The quote from Isaiah supports Jesus summary of them as **hypocrites!** (in history, *play actors* or people who wear masks!)

Jesus turns from the theologians and address the crowd and rejects the ritual acts of purity and rejects the Kosher rules - **there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile but the things that come out are what defile.**

James (Jesus' half-brother) then picks up the theme as bluntly as Jesus did in his list of things that defile.

- ✦ James likes parallels:
 - God is the **Father of lights** and there is **no shadow**: good things come from God & bad things don't!
 - be **quick to listen** and **slow to speak**: you learn best that way!
 - You might **hear** God's word, but you need to **do** what God wants for it to make any difference!
 - ✦ James is quite ruthless in what he expects - **rid yourselves** is literally *strip*, and then he uses two interesting words:
 - **sordidness** has its origins in a medical condition - *wax in the ear!*
 - Then **rank growth** is a horticultural reference for clearing weeds. Listening alone doesn't make a person a Christian - what you hear has to make a difference.
- Then the example of the **mirror** is very practical: if you looked in the mirror and you saw that you were a mess, you wouldn't forget but you would do something about it: it is those who are **doers and act** that make the grade!

- ✦ His parting shot for today is to state boldly the difference faith makes:
 - i. Control your **tongue**. This is what comes out of a person and reveals what is inside a person. Few writers are quite so candid **if any think they are religious and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.**
 - ii. **Care for widows and orphans** - take seriously the needs of those around you: there is never any point telling someone that God loves them if you don't!
 - iii. Live like a Christian - or as James puts it, **keep oneself unstained by the world.**

Standing up in Church is the easy bit - it is standing apart from the hypocrites and standing out as a Christian that is the real challenge.