

Mark 7 'Cleanliness'

So, in our gospel reading today, we've heard a lot about the idea of 'cleanliness', and about washing, and what's clean and what's dirty.

I think, and by 'I think' I mean I've stolen the idea for this sermon off someone else, we could talk about four different kinds of cleanliness. Four different ways we, as humans, make ourselves clean...

The first one is the most obvious one. It's physical cleanness - it's a shower, it's bath-night, it's keeping our bodies clean.

It's important for us to do this to stay healthy, to keep the dirt and the germs away.

But physical cleanness was very important for the Pharisees, because it was completely **linked with a second kind of cleanness...**

Which is ritual cleanness. Now, to talk about ritual cleanness, we need to throw ourselves into the Old Testament. And for the OT to make sense, we need to make sure we all know one thing.

Can anyone tell me, what 'holiness', literally means? (If Sue R is there she already knows)

Separateness. The holiness of God, is the fact that God is completely separate, that God exists in God's own realm.

So, when we look at all of the rules in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, which sometimes seem baffling to us, because it's all about clean or unclean foods, or women having to purify themselves, or how long to keep lepers away from the camp, it's all about a cleanness, which means the Israelites would be able to approach that separate space where God lives. It was all about trying to get as little dirt and sin on you as possible, so that you could approach the holiness of God.

So, in our gospel reading, when they're talking about eating without washing your hands, it's not just that physical cleanness, but that ritual cleanness a lot of Jewish people try to keep to.

So when Jesus says: **'there is nothing outside a person that be going in can defile'** he's completely overthrowing all of those rules that Jewish people kept to, or still do keep to, to try and get closer to the holiness of God.

Physical, and ritual, cleanness are our first two. Which Jesus has just said, 'look, forget about that'. So, if we're not worried about that, what comes in its place?

Our third type of cleanliness - our moral, or we could call it our ethical, cleanliness. How do I behave in a situation? Does what I do make me feel clean, or does it make me feel a bit grubby? Of course, as the grownups will know, sometimes this isn't always clear-cut. If you'll allow me an anecdote...

A couple of weeks ago, as Chaplain to the air cadets, I was teaching them a session of ethics. And we talked about whether lying is ever okay. Are there times when lying is okay? What you lie to protect someone? Is that different? Is that better? Sometimes life is never as clear-cut as we would like it, and we have to navigate what's put in front of us.

What was the right thing to do in one situation, may not always be the right thing to do in every situation. So we have to ask ourselves, how clean do our souls feel? Do we feel we can justify what we have done, that we can say, hand on heart, I think that was the best decision, the most Christian decision, at the time? And not just for the big moments, the big decisions, but asking ourselves this, as a quiet, constant question. Because let's face it, things like envy, are very quiet, but very dangerous.

Physical, ritual, and moral cleanliness. What's the last one?

Spiritual.

When God looks at our hearts, at our souls, how clean does he think they are? God is saying, look forget all of the rules about washing, forget all of the rules about what to eat or to not eat, forget all the traditions you've built up over the years.

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God asks: In your heart of hearts, in your very soul, do you love your God, and do you love your neighbour?

Can you say to God: **'God, I know I'm a bumbling human, and I know I'll never get it right all the time, but I do honestly try. I honestly try to follow your commandments, and I try to do the right thing because you have asked me to. I try to keep myself as clean as possible, but I'm always going to need your help'**

Friends, if you can say this, with your hand on your heart, I think we're all going in the right direction.

And don't forget - our God is the God of forgiveness. Our God is the God who forgives you every week, at the words of the absolution. Our God is the God who forgives you every time, whenever you truly repent. So if you feel like you've fluffed it all up again, just know our God is there, waiting to forgive you.