

Mark 7:1-23 – Washing hands to Hearts

Evensong: 13th July 2025

How might we relate to a seemingly obscure discussion between the Pharisees and Jesus regarding washing hands. How can that New Testament passage, connect with our lives? Well, we need to get inside the world of first century Judaism.

First off, let's consider the Pharisees. In the Gospels, as in that reading, Jesus is often presented as in conflict with the Pharisees, and because of how they're portrayed by the Gospel writers they get a bad press. 'Pharisee' equates to arrogance, legalism, and hypocrisy. But the reality was very different. The Pharisees were a reformist group of lay people. They believed that the Jewish faith needed to be lived out in the daily life of ordinary people, not just something observed by an elite group of religious professionals in Jerusalem. They were spiritual people who took the practice of their faith seriously, and Jesus probably had more in common with the Pharisees than any other Jewish group. There were, of course, hypocrites amongst them, as there are in all religious communities, but judging the whole community of Pharisees by a few hypocrites is like assessing the church based on encounters with a few rigid and judgmental Christians.

Their desire was to be faithful to God, and to live lives that acknowledged God's presence everywhere and in everything. To help them do this, the Pharisees developed systems of rituals and practices that helped make holy the common things of life. They wanted to add a religious dimension to everything they did. So, we aren't talking about empty ritual, but deeply meaningful practices that touched on the heart of people's relationship with God. Many of these rituals governed how food was prepared and consumed. This is where this passage comes in. 'Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them.'

The issue at stake isn't about hand washing. After all, as we know only too well, washing hands before meals is basic hygiene. This story is about how to be a good Jew in the first century; about who is offering a way of life that honours God; and the state of our hearts. The presenting issue isn't that different from how we use various practices and rituals – from saying grace before a meal to reading the Bible, using the Prayer Book to singing hymns, from kneeling or standing for different prayers to celebrating the sacraments. They're all outward signs or actions that express a deep inner spiritual meaning.

So, the objection that the Pharisees and scribes raised over the disciples' eating with unwashed hands wasn't about washing off dirt. It was all about ritual uncleanness or spiritual purity. To guard against the danger of becoming spiritually unclean, the Pharisees washed their hands ritually before meals, and here they criticise the disciples for not doing the same. Their focus was obedience to God's commandments, finding a way of honouring God, finding a way to be holy – as God is holy. But then comes Jesus' criticism. He accuses them of being hypocrites, quoting the prophet Isaiah: "This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines." 'You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.'

The problem Jesus saw was that for some Pharisees there had developed a big gap between their external religious practice and their inner faith. The outward action didn't match up with the inward spirituality. They had concentrated so much on these external religious practices that what was going on in their hearts had been forgotten, even avoided.

Let's move away from the Pharisees and zoom in on us. This criticism might be levelled at anyone who claims to follow a religion. However simple our faith, there are always plenty of outward signs of religion that might look holy and well meaning, but it's our relationship with God (what goes on within our heart – within the centre of our being), that really matters. Remember the classic Anglican definition of a sacrament? 'An outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace....' We are walking sacraments. What we do, how we behave, our words and actions and attitudes, are to express something that's deep from within us – something that arises from our relationship with God.

There are two commands that shape everything we are and do: love God and love our fellow human beings. It's not exactly a long list of rules, yet we know it's incredibly demanding. It challenges us deep within, especially if we're seeking to allow those commands to shape and influence every aspect of our lives. Yet, that's the challenge presented to us. It's about not only honouring God with our lips but also allowing our entire lives to be moulded by the command to love and to be shaped by God's love for us.

Our Christian faith counts for little if we don't allow it to shape how we live, how we relate to people, how we treat those about us. Authentic faith is about God's grace changing our heart and mind so that it transforms the way we live. It's not a matter of lip service, but of heart service. Authentic faith is about a different way of living that flows naturally from a heart that's being transformed by God's grace, and therefore a heart that can do no less than seek to make all of life about loving God and loving others.

A passage that starts off about washing hands before a meal, ends up taking us into the depths of our being – to the centre of who we are – to what, as Jesus put it, 'is within'. It takes us to what Christian spirituality is about – to gaining and maintaining a heart infused with the divine heart of love.

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