

Sunday 25th August 2024

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God is love, let us adore God by sharing God's love.

God is ever present, around us and within us, we worship together in God.

Readings James 1:17-25 ([CEV](#))
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 20-23 ([CEV](#))

Story [The Paper Bag Princess](#) by Robert Munsch

Reflection

I wonder how many rituals you have developed in your life. Rituals are things that you as part of doing something, often before doing something, and often they become tied into a sense of superstition. Watch sport on television and you will become aware of how much ritual plays a part for those playing – athletes before a race, tennis players before a serve, the preparation before a golf swing all these can become a ritual. Perhaps you are someone who has to lay everything out before doing a DIY job, or cooking, perhaps you have a sporting ritual, it is surprising how many rituals we have in our lives, even the order in which you take your tablets.

The Jewish people had lots of rituals, they were written into their law, the Mishnah, and some of these rituals were very complicated. When the Pharisees challenged Jesus over the disciples failure to wash their hands before eating they were not talking about the common sense practice of cleaning your hands before eating but a complicated ritual which involved many washings not just of hands but the containers holding the water to wash the hands.

Jesus responds with a challenge of his own, quoting a passage from Isaiah at them and commentating that it seems the law they had written had become more important than God. Rituals can be like that they become more important than the actual task of which they are a part. Jesus goes on to point out to his listeners that it is not what goes into their mouth that causes harm it is what comes out of their mouth, hurtful words and words designed to cause trouble. We have seen an example of that recently in the incitement to riot expressed through words shared on social media.

This is perhaps what James is picking up on when he talks about being slow to speak or get angry. Anger he says gets in the way of good deeds. He also picks up on the essence of Jesus response to the Pharisees saying that is you only listen to the message and do not act upon it then you are like someone who looks in the mirror but does not really see what the mirror reflects. We can all be a little guilty of that, interpreting what we see to match our mind's eye.

Mirrors have many uses and are often used in stories 0 the wicked step mother in Snow White used a mirror but she really only wanted it to show one thing when she asked it who was the fairest in all the land. When it did not she got angry and her actions form the story of Snow White. In Harry Potter and the Philosopher's stone harry discovers a mirror that shows the heart's true desire, a mirror not for the faint hearted and which itself can become an obsession as Harry discovers. It is a strange idea that two people looking into a mirror can both see different things, or maybe not so strange for that is often the case if we are honest for we often see what we want to see and not what the mirror really reflects.

Many years ago now there was a programme on the television where Trinny and Suzanne invited people to view themselves, almost naked, in a 360 degree mirror, a mirror that showed all sides and views. It was frightening for most people as they were faced with a reality they had often chosen to deny. That is what James is suggesting we have to do but

instead of a glass mirror he suggests we use the Perfect Law to examine our inner self and try everyday to grow more like Jesus, revealing more of God within us. To do anything less, we are told, is worthless.

What then, is the perfect law. Well not the law that the Pharisees and the scribes used to keep people from God. By the time of Jesus, the ten words of freedom given to Moses on Mount Sinai had expanded. In an attempt to cover every eventuality of life there were in excess of 600 laws. The Perfect Law I would suggest are the original ten words for freedom which used not as a list of don'ts but rather a measuring stick of how far we have journeyed towards our full humanity reveal how we are changing day by day, week by week, month by month.

How can we honour our relationship with God? By living our lives lovingly, choosing what is loving and speaking the truth from our hearts.

Do not spread gossip or tell lies about others, do nothing that harms another, be a good neighbour to all.

Love even those whose choices are less than loving, and work closely with those who seek the way of love, even when it means going without themselves. Be generous, and do not make money out of the misfortune of others, be truthful and loyal always choosing the loving action.

Do this and you are following the path to full humanity and nothing will get in your way.

Poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou is quoted as saying, 'I've learnt that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.' The Jesus way is to build people up, to make them feel worth something, valued, to feel that they belong. How many of our words and actions do the opposite?

Imagine for a minute you are in the midst of preparing a meal for some friends when an acquaintance arrives at the door unexpectedly, how might you respond? Edmund Banyard suggests this way as the loving way –

'Why, what a pleasant surprise, you've caught me in the middle of cooking, but its lovely to see you. You won't mind joining me in the kitchen and you'll stay for lunch? No problem. I've got a couple of friends coming, they live alone, one's just lost her husband. No, there'll be plenty for all of us and they'll love to meet you.' It is not the way many would respond but we can see how it would make the person feel and the effect it would have, and I can see Jesus responding in that way.

All our words and actions matter but it is the effect they have that lasts, the difference they made that is remembered. That is why it is so important to be careful with words and sensitive in our actions. As James says listen first, then respond carefully and be slow to anger. Perhaps if Prince Ronald had done that Princess Elizabeth might have married him, instead his words showed his true self and it was not a nice self. What do our words say about us?

Following Jesus is not the easy option, it involves putting others first, giving up what we really want, listening to that still small voice, being brave enough to look in the mirror of desire and accept and remember what you see and then seek to grow more loving.

I believe that we have only skimmed the surface of what it means to be fully human. The journey we take involves living the truth that God is everywhere and in everything and everyone and so we greet God in everything and everyone. The journey we take means realising that we are the answer to prayer and that prayer is living in awareness, listening and responding and learning and growing. It is the Jesus way.