

Sunday 29th August 2021
Trinity 13 (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Deuteronomy 4.1-2,6-9
NT: James 1.17-end
G: Mark 7.1-8,14-15,21-23

'And they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots and bronze kettles. (Mark 7: 4)

At first hearing, today's gospel sounds simple. We must not fuss about local and particular things; we must concentrate the energies of our hearts upon God. Never mind the 'bronze kettles', love God with all your heart. But, here, Jesus equally does not like how the Pharisees ignore the 'commandments of God' and stick to human tradition. Just when we are congratulating ourselves on our broad, generous, large devotion to the eternal values, Jesus says, 'and just' remember that broad generous devotion to eternal values can be sometimes an alibi for not doing what you have got to do in relation to those whom you have an obligation. It is not good to say that I'd rather serve God than do my duty to brothers, sisters, family, friends and even to enemies.

Jesus breaks though the categories we would like to bring. We like to think – or many of us do – in terms of that simple opposition, legalistic religion, which is all about doing the right thing in small particulars, and broad generous hearted devotion to God. Some of these oppositions will probably raise their heads in this congregation as well as in the wider national Church. Devotion to principle is not an excuse for tearing up relationships any more than exact keeping of the law is an excuse for not giving your heart to God. The Gospel is not going to make things easy for us, and there is no surprise in this. It's entirely in character.

James, in his letter this morning talks of 'those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act – they will be blessed in their doing'. The perfect law is after all about our freedom and liberty. God called a people in our Old Testament reading out of slavery into freedom, the freedom of the commandments of God. You might ask, isn't freedom more available when we dethrone God as well? Don't we need to be free of God in order to be truly free? But what if this God that we are reading about is not just another individual pursuing a private agenda, defending his interests. He is more the one who says to Moses: 'I am who I am', who does not need to negotiate, defend, argue or control? The story of exodus begins with: 'I am who I am'. When we are told that only in relationship to him can we become truly human, we are not ascribing to God the 'liberties' of a tyrant. Rather, it's more like saying: 'if you want to swim, you must begin to understand the sea'. If we won't follow the rhythm of the divine ocean, we shall not learn to swim. When God sets his people free, it isn't for some vague paradise of endless consumer choice, but for that kind of response to reality. This is what the giving of the law is all about. It is what our freedom is for. Now, we can be creative and craft together a way of living. This is where Justice is found, not simply in fairness, but more as a whole climate of social health, a life that rests on and reinforces trust.

This is the kind of trust that the letter of James presents: 'Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change'. Only God gives the growth. But it will also require attention to context, to doing, to detail on our part. There are a number of leaders in the Church of England who when discuss plans for 'growth', seem to be saying: 'This is what we have to offer to the church, here is our great list of contributions we are going to make to

the revival of the Church' – But, this could sound a bit like the misguided abstract generous devotion of the heart to God. But the Church's historic success in this land depended highly on its attention to the local, to the details of the parish context, to caring for local communities, to listening to people's needs. Priests work best when they do not know exactly where the next request is coming from, paying attention to details, not knowing what is going to be drawn from them, as they serve and love their own people – not when they claim to present generous ideas of devotion that make no difference.

Though we like to think that this parish church is good at this level of engagement, it would not harm to be reminded of just how easily all of us fall off that narrow point of balance on which, it seems, Jesus alone stands with complete confidence. That point where he stands making of his whole being, in every relationship, in every particular, a peace-making gift to God in life and in death, serving his Father in small particulars. We all fall off; we all get it wrong from time to time; we are not going, of ourselves to make a perfect offering acceptable to the Father, whether by attention to large hearted generous devotion or attention to particulars. But we are called to stand for a bit here, where Jesus is; to stand in his company at his table and to keep our eyes on him sufficiently, for just a bit, not to fall off. We come to Holy Communion so that he can look us in the eye and hold us steady for this moment – a steadiness that makes of his being a complete offering to the Father.

In Aramaic, the Eucharist is called the Corbana, a word used also among Arabic speaking Christians in the Middle East today. It is the same word for 'corban' – given to God. This is corban. When we bring our hopes, intercessions, concerns, and failings here where we can stand with Christ and let him hold us in his gaze for a moment, then that is corban. Not a devotion to God which lets us off the small particulars, not some great general wash of

generous feelings towards the transcendent, or a nit-picking attention to details on the grounds that we hope might please God. We are here, simply being where the Holy is given to God, where Jesus gives himself as corbana to God, and we by the gift of his spirit are drawn into his giving, into his praying, into his seeing.

For Billie Kate Moore who is being baptised today, is that this promise of Christ to be there for her until the end of the world is made by name to her; she is one more unique reflection of Christ's glory and love beginning to be shaped and nourished in her anchored to the unchanging self-consistency of God. Her life like ours is fragile. But, this fragile life is now linked to a life that is not its own, to Christ's life – a gift that is both unchanging and uncontrollable. As she comes to be anchored in Christ, we are called at this Eucharist with her let Jesus hold us in his gaze. Without this, the rest of our discipleship falls apart completely and we polarise into those easy oppositions with which we started and which Jesus so helpfully and frighteningly explodes for us. Let us, then stand with him, stand before him; let him hold us in his gaze and let us be drawn by him to the Father, so that ourselves – our souls and bodies – With Billie, please God - are made by his gift a holy and acceptable 'corbana'.

Fr Yazid Said