

2nd September 2018. Mark 7: 1-8, 14-23
9.30am Communion Service at Christ Church
and 11.15am at St. John's Newsholme. Sharon Quinn.

Lord Jesus, open our hearts and minds so that we connect and grow in our relationship with you. Amen

Meat Pie Harry

Some of you may have heard of some past 'Keighley characters' like Emily Matchbox or Keighley Cowboy. You may remember them yourselves or have heard stories about them from your grandparents or parents.

Those old characters, to me, just sounded like they may as well have been from another planet never mind from Keighley's past as they were just people my Grandma used to talk about, they sounded ancient!

Being a Keighley lass, born and bred. I have so many memories of times spent 'leckin out' with friends. We used to walk for miles, especially on weekends or school holidays, we'd be out all day. There were only a couple of rules to follow which were - don't trust any strangers (I could talk to them as long as I didn't trust them)! Plus be back home before it got dark. Seemed simple enough at the time!

When I was a child, the odd characters I remember in Keighley were what we openly called 'tramps'. I remember two tramps that used to wander all over Keighley. I can only remember the name of one of them. He was called Meat Pie Harry! Well that is what everyone called him anyway.

I remember him as being a big tall man with really dark, matted and frizzy hair! All his clothes were dark and really baggy and full of rips and holes. Even his feet poked out of his shoes because they were so worn. His face and hands and fingernails were absolutely filthy with dirt. He never made any sense when he spoke, I presumed he was speaking in a foreign language.

He stank too. One particular memory that has stuck in my mind about Meat Pie Harry was when I had just bought some fish and chips 'to eat now' not 'wrapped up' so that I could eat them whilst walking through town. I said to Meat Pie Harry,
"Do you want a chip"?

With his huge hands he rustled in my bag of fish and chips and he took my whole fish!

I remember feeling really mad at him, I was only given a limited amount of pocket money. I couldn't just go and buy another one. At least I still had my chips to eat!

Looking back on this memory, I realise there is so much information that is missing about Meat Pie Harry, questions that I would want answers to now. At the time though I didn't even give him much second thought.

Complicated traditions

Our gospel reading from Mark, chapter 7 tells us of a dispute over purity rules and traditions about complex food preparation and eating rituals.

The religious leaders the Pharisees and some scribes have come from Jerusalem to Galilee to find out what all the fuss is about regarding this Jesus who performs miracles, preaches and heals. They have many questions and speculation about who Jesus is. He has become famous. Previously we have heard how Jesus miraculously fed over 5,000 men and crowds were now following him. This visit by the Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem shows that it is a visit of somewhat national importance.

Antagonists

The Pharisees question Jesus as to why he is allowing his disciples to blatantly eat their food without observing the traditional rules of ritual hand washing. This was not a concern about hygiene. This was about disputing Jesus' leadership as he was not teaching conformity of the traditional regulations passed down from the elders in Judaism.

To put this into perspective the washing of hands purity ritual was a very elaborate and time consuming one. The Pharisees expected this to be done before every meal and between each course. Mark gives us a further explanation in verse 4 that there are complex rules about the correct washing of cups, pots, and bowls that are expected to be adhered to, even ensuring being ritually clean, undefiled and pure by washing after visiting the market.

There is a stark contrast here as we know that Jesus and the disciples not only eat food without observing purity rules but they also touched

lepers, ate with social outcasts, basically were touched by many unclean people. These people were being healed and restored without following the washing traditions of the Pharisees. The traditions of the elders were under threat of being lost to more and more people. Jesus and the disciples were not conforming to the cultural expectations of Judaism.

Jesus abruptly responds

Jesus doesn't answer the question of why he is allowing this with a long parable, with a miracle, or even persuasion.

He makes a very direct statement instead, calling the Pharisees and scribes *'hypocrites'*.

Jesus again uses scripture in Mark in verse 7, he refers to a higher authority to back up his accusation of hypocrisy.

He refers to the prophet Isaiah 29:13 when he tells us that God tells us, *'these people honour me with their words, but their heart is really far away from me'.* *It is no use for them to worship me, because they teach human rules as though they were my laws!*

Real worship

A hypocrite means an actor, a fraud, a pretender. Jesus is making a clear statement that the Pharisees bend their own rules to suit themselves in many ways which are breaking the true commandment laws that are God given through Moses.

Jesus' concern here is that the man-made traditions, the 'human laws' have become so prevalent and all consuming enough to become more important than the actual laws given by God. The original purpose of these beliefs and customs passed down by rabbis was to provide guidance and direction so that people did not break the commandments that are from scripture.

Do you think Meat Pie Harry was concerned with any washing tradition before he ate my fish? He definitely was unclean. He was outwardly hygienically unclean. Does this automatically make him impure or unclean on the inside? Did this make him unacceptable in God's eyes?

Progress?

The outward state of Meat Pie Harry was somehow culturally

acceptable when I was a child. We have moved on already traditionally. We now say homeless person, not tramp. We now judge whether a person sat on the street begging has name brand trainers or clothes on. We now question whether they are one of those people who are only pretending to be homeless to collect money from people. It is best not to risk it and just walk on by isn't it? The socially accepted rules now are not to risk giving a homeless person any money because it may contribute to any alcohol or drug addictions. Yet this makes us risk reverting back to the Meat Pie Harry days of what rules we expect to see a homeless person outwardly look like.

These are some aspects of our new human made rules that Isaiah speaks of, aren't they?

So how do we ensure that we are setting ourselves aside properly for God in worship today? How do we ensure that our hearts are not far away from God? How do we ensure that we aren't honouring God in words only but are close to him in our hearts also?

Jesus as always is our answer, he gives us the answer in Mark verse 14 where he calls the crowd to him and makes sure they are all ready to listen and to understand. As Mark explains, Jesus teaches us *'there is nothing that goes into you from the outside which can defile you or make you ritually unclean. Rather it is what comes out of you that makes you unclean.'*

The disciples have grasped and understood that they could ignore the human made rule of washing before eating because they know that Jesus made unclean people clean anyway.

What they failed to fully understand was that what really makes people unclean or defiles them comes from within. That it was an internal problem, not a problem with tradition.

They ask Jesus to explain what he meant. Jesus thought he had made it very clear what he meant. Mark does use straightforward language to reiterate this by not using a lengthy parable or any hidden meanings, as he does in other parts of his gospel writing.

Jesus gives his disciples a rather harsh response when they ask him for further explanation as he expects them to understand.

Verse 18 'you are no more intelligent than the others...don't you understand?'

'Nothing that goes into you from the outside can really make you unclean because it does not go into your heart but into your stomach and then goes on out of the body. He is declaring that all foods are clean and fit to be eaten. This is radical, Jesus is giving a whole new doctrine or guideline here.

Jesus is explaining that it is our ideas from within us that come straight from our hearts that can lead us to do immoral or sinful things like rob, kill, commit adultery, be greedy, be deceitful, indecent, jealous, slanderous, proud and foolish.

Hard of heart

I find other interpretations of Mark particularly helpful in explaining further about the human heart. For the English Standard version of Mark chapter 6, verse 52 says that the disciples did not fully understand due to their hearts being hardened. With a hardened heart the disciples could not fully grasp that it was something within themselves which alienated people from God.

Mark shows us that the past is important but not as influential or as creative as truly believing that our faith is a response to God's faithfulness. Faith is not a matter of privilege.

We do risk having that 'hardness of heart' that the bible mentions if we were to be predominantly influenced by our media. It is all too easy to neglect what is within us, our spiritual selves.

I was listening to Radio Leeds when a person came on in response to the question "Are we influenced by celebrity and cultural obsession about the way we look?" Do we aspire to be like the images we see that aren't even real?

I particularly liked this man's response. He said

"people should feel ok about how they are warts n all, my teeth aren't pearly white, I wear glasses, I'm a bit overweight". It must be hard for teenagers nowadays. It can be unfortunate that the so-called ugly duckling can conceal a heart of gold. Our society is concentrating on the outward more than ever".

James – a genuine religion

Our first reading from James chapter 1 verse 17 reminds us that *'every good gift and every perfect present comes from heaven; it comes down from God. We are to be God's first fruits in the world by being quick to hear others, slow to speak and slow to become angry.'*

We are told to put this into practice by not simply listening to God's word then conveniently forgetting it but by growing a pure and genuine religion. James tells us in verse 27 that this includes taking care of orphans and widows. These were some of the most desperate and vulnerable people back then.

There is still a softening of the heart needed within us so that we can fully understand what Mark and James is telling us – that God is the creator or heavenly lights, the Father of lights who does not change or cause darkness by turning. He remains the same. It is us that grows to look beyond the dirt, to care for the hearts of others.

Amen