

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 10th Sunday after Trinity – 16th August 2020

All Saints' Marseille

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The blind leading the blind is an expression we all use, one of many that come from the Bible. If one person is blind, how can they lead another without them both getting lost? He was referring to the Pharisees who were, in Jesus's mind, unable to see the truth of what he was doing and saying, and busy guiding others into not understanding it too. Here Jesus is explaining to his disciples a different way of looking at cleanliness. In an era of very little if any sanitation, no disinfectant or javel, no protective masks to shield against infection, lack of cleanliness could be fatal. The Israelites were very different from most other people at the time because they had it all laid out for them by Moses in the book of Leviticus, exactly what cleanliness meant. He, it's thought, laid out strict definitions of what made people clean or unclean, from moral behavior through what they could eat to what they could touch. It's a long book and very detailed. For example, there are lists of animals that cannot be eaten. These include any animal with paws, camels, hyraxes, and pigs, no fish which do not have both fins and scales, rats, lizards, vultures, owls, hawks, cormorants, herons, storks, hoopoes and bats. Moses deals with everything from skin diseases to mildew to leaving part of your harvest for the poor to glean to not having tattoos and not trimming your beard. And this level of detail on all matters is strictly enforced by the Pharisees. There are harsh punishments outlined, up to and including death for flouting these rules.

They enforce them so strictly that they have in many cases lost sight of the reason for all of these instructions – to keep Israel as a people who behave well to each other and to those around them, who honour and respect the riches of nature, and who are seen as a fair and just people with high moral and personal standards. They are to be different from all the other nations whose personal habits didn't

bear thinking about. They are to be the holy people of God and so must be scrupulously clean.

Jesus sees these regulations being enforced without any understanding of the bigger picture. To him it doesn't matter what you eat or drink – your body will process it very efficiently and it'll emerge the other end. He is much more concerned with the words and actions coming from the heart. He couldn't care less if you eat a prawn or a heron or don't wash your hands before lunch. What he cares about is whether you are clean inside, and live a good life, dealing fairly with others and helping those in need. It's from the heart that the really bad things come, like lies, theft, murder and so on.

Because the Israelites had this code of conduct from Leviticus, they rather looked down upon other nationalities who didn't have such a code – they considered them dirty and not to be mingled with. God's holy and chosen people must keep away from foreigners and they called them dogs. (Dogs then were not the pampered pooches of today, but lived on the streets by their wits, mangy, flea infested and filthy).

On first reading this passage about Jesus and the Canaanite mother it seems rather shocking that he would be so insulting to someone who has asked him for help. Surely that's not the way he of all people should react. But Jesus of course knows God's plan, which he has been sent to carry out, of Israel being the light to the rest of the world. He himself is a Jew, of God's chosen people, and the timescale is that he comes to the Israelite nation first, to bring in the new kingdom of God there. Only once he has done that, will he tackle the other nations. As Isaiah says, "my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples". But this lady seems to have got ahead of the plan, for she not only knows Jesus as Lord, Son of David, but she has absolute faith that he can cure her daughter. Jesus protests that he was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel but she's having none of that – she knows who he is and what he can do, way before many of the people of Israel, and isn't afraid to answer back. She has great faith and it's rewarded. She somehow knows that if Jesus is Israel's Messiah, then he will bring blessings to the whole world. It seems a very natural reaction from a mother worried sick about her child – that never mind who he's here for, she needs his help right now. It makes me wonder how she knew all this?

Many Christians have tried to forget the specialness of Israel, but none of the gospel writers ever do and nor does Jesus. He is clear that he hasn't come to do away with the law or Israel's special status, but to make sure that God's new life would come into the world through Israel.

We still see today the effects of racial prejudice – the horrors of the Nazi programme of extermination of 6 million people just because they were Jews, the apartheid system of South Africa, the murder of black people in America by police. It's still a huge challenge to all of us today – to live and work together in harmony, regardless of background. I found it humbling to read Nelson Mandela's story and his insistence on reconciliation after all the injustice he and his friends had endured, made all the more poignant by our visit to Robben Island a few years ago and seeing the tiny bare cell that he lived in, and the blinding white of the rock quarry where the political prisoners worked in full sun with no eye protection.

Changing culture is hard. Getting to know and work with people who don't look like us can be difficult for some. It takes time and effort and much prayer. Education helps, and it's interesting to see the results of the National Trust in England's programme in partnership with schools, where pupils of different backgrounds study the large mansions built on some dubious trades, and their contents, from their own heritage perspective. A sword labelled from the Indian Mutiny is, in the eyes of a young girl from an Indian family, a sword from the 1st War of Independence. Statues of slave traders are now seen as offensive, and the work in the 19th century of William Wilberforce, along with his friends, is continuing to this day as police forces fight against modern day slavery.

But bad things happen because good people let them. If we really are Christians, then the challenge for us today goes right back to Jesus's concern about the critical thing – what is in our heart, not our outward persona. How do we become pure of heart in this modern world, and live our lives according to his laws? How do we become worthy of his coming to be a blessing for the whole world, via his chosen people? How can we match the faith of that mother who just wanted him to heal her daughter – and knew he could? How do we prove to him that we are clean, inside and out?

Amen