

The Commandment of God

a sermon preached on the

13th Sunday after Pentecost

Sunday 30 August 2009

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore

parish priest

Lection: Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9, Psalm 15, Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

It's so easy to sledge Pharisees – I've done my fair share, and continue to catch myself out! I need to remind myself that the Pharisee is the faithful adherent to the religious tradition, endeavouring to take seriously and diligently the traditions which have been handed down. "You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it," Moses told the Israelites on the edge of the promised land, "but keep the commandments of the LORD your God with which I am charging you."¹ The same injunction echoes throughout the Torah and the Prophets, and was every faithful Jew's obligation. Honesty compels me to admit that the best of what the Pharisee represented is the same faithfulness to God that I myself strive for. Indeed, I cannot help but notice in the development of my own faith the work of the inner Pharisee in me. Respect for, and discipline in, the reading and study of Scripture, the prayer of Eucharist and Liturgy of the Hours, as well as the fundamentals of an ethical life – these all depend upon faithfulness to tradition which is guided by the inner Pharisee.

Yet, as Jesus' frequent criticisms abundantly reveal, the Pharisee is always at risk of confusing what is essential to a dynamic and living faith with what may stand in its way. And there are many modern equivalents to the 'washing of vessels and foods' which practitioners of religious faith can declare to be essential. And I remain always at risk of looking at others around me in the religious marketplace and accusing them - in my heart if not on my lips - of eating "with defiled hands"², of not living "according to the tradition of the elders", as I have come to understand that tradition. So, as I have been reminded this week, watching the panes of glass being fitted to our marvellous long-awaited entrance canopy, those who live in glass houses ought not to throw stones!

There's no doubt that faithfulness to religious tradition presents us with a painful conundrum. We stand in a tradition which has been handed down, faithfulness to which is essential in order to remain grounded in it. The 'tradition of the elders' is my deepest inheritance, like the subterranean stream, from which my life is sustained. If I become disconnected from the tradition, I become rootless, as so many people are. The role of the Pharisee is to keep a person, and community, connected to the tradition in which life's meaning and purpose is grounded. Historically and institutionally, the Church has excelled in this role. However, its negative manifestations may have overwhelmed the good - anathematising, excommunicating, abusing and exterminating those individuals and despised minorities it deems to be threatening tradition.

Yet the revelation in Jesus is something of a paradox - simultaneously consistent with all that has gone before *and* yet utterly novel. Religious faith must develop, as though governed by the same laws of evolution which structure all other phenomena in the cosmos. There seems to be a law of the soul, just as there is a law of physics, which is the law of opposites. All evolutionary movement seems to proceed via two conflicting, equally-vital energies, like poles of a magnet – the energy of an historical grounding, and the energy of a leading edge of development. Without the former, a species has no identity. Without the latter, a species stagnates and will be superseded by more sophisticated forms of life. All forms of life die where there is no development, and this is as true of faith development as it is for biological and psychological development.

As we agonise over the demise of the institutional Church, and continue to dream up rescue plans modelled on the marketing culture around us, it may be timely to reflect upon the fact that a religious vessel which is no longer able to contain the movement of the Spirit is bound to be superseded by a new form. If the spiritual

¹ Deuteronomy 4:2

² Mark 7:3,5

resources which the Church gladly adopted in the first few centuries of the Common Era are no longer capable of supporting the movement of the Spirit within this 21st century age, then these same resources are bound to be superseded by new forms which are capable of doing so. A more personal reflection on the matter may be more helpful, because less prone to projection, and truly vital since the human heart is where all genuine and lasting development begins. ³ If the spiritual resources we gladly adopted when we were 12 years of age are no longer capable of supporting the movement of the Spirit within us as adults, then these same resources are bound to be superseded by new forms which are able to support development.

So the necessary suffering of the Pharisee is to faithfully keep the commandments, yet be willing to sacrifice them when called to do so to the Spirit who blows where she will, who is always at work generating new forms of life, urging and pushing at the leading edge of development. Arrested, or forbidden, faith development is a great tragedy for individuals, for the church as community, and for the church's mission – for it would seem that the majority of modern men and women in the West are not inclined to buy the religious products of a tradition which belong to a Sunday school age of faith. Personally, it is my own tendency to concretise some aspect of received religious tradition which is actually the defilement, the fatal impediment to following Jesus. So living according to the commandment of God is obedience to this law of opposites – remaining faithful to the tradition, *and* trusting the Spirit who is doing something new.

However, because I find the tension between the received tradition and what the Spirit of Christ is revealing so painful and unconformable and disorienting, I am tempted to resolve the tension, prematurely, one way or the other - either entrenching myself, doggedly defending an earlier stage of religious development, or abandoning the tradition altogether in order to pursue an imagined freedom. In the first instance I stagnate, personally, and my stagnation not only makes me sick but is a scandal to the mission of Christ, because in my refusal to enter the kingdom of heaven I also prevent others from entering. ⁴ In the second case, though I imagine I am free in fact I become groundless, disconnected, lost, easy prey to every fad, to each successive novelty in the religious and consumer marketplace.

So, somewhat late in the day, I have come to recognise the one necessary path, the narrow road which leads to salvation, ⁵ by which the illness of the extremes can be healed. The religious task I now see is to live hopefully and lovingly *under the law of opposites*. What I must learn to do, by the grace of God, is to consciously stand in the place of tension between the 'tradition of the elders' and the 'commandment of God' which is the law of the Spirit. Only by standing in this place, suffering the opposites – of which the cross is the transforming and healing sign – will it be possible to heal the violent and destructive flipping from one pole to the other. Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of this narrow way which leads to life because he consciously and willingly suffers the opposites, the cross which is the sign of evolutionary development. His bread of life and cup of suffering are the signs and promise of this transformation in my life and the life of all people.

david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz

³ Mark 7:21-22

⁴ Matthew 23:13

⁵ Matthew 7:13-14