

22nd Sunday B 3/9/06 Mary Mags

This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me Mark 7:6, quoting Isaiah 29:13

What place have external things in the life of a Christian? Today's gospel sees Jesus and his followers in dispute with the Pharisees. It is a fascinating if rather confusing account. We begin with the information that the Pharisees are looking askance at Jesus and his followers, for they seem not to be following various purification rituals. Straight away what we find is rather puzzling, for Mark tells us that not just Pharisees but all Jews were subject to these regulations, and that is not actually correct. Priests were all under such restrictions, but in the time of Jesus ordinary Jews were not. So why would the Pharisees expect Jesus and his followers to be doing as they do? Some have answered, tantalisingly, that perhaps this is evidence that Jesus's own movement was far closer, at least in origin, to that of the Pharisees that hindsight suggests. We do not know.

We do know that Jesus responds with passion to their accusations, quoting from Isaiah those telling words which have held every Christian in judgement ever since: *This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.* We do well to attend to them. As we do, we need to look at what follows, and in particular at Jesus's

assertion that it is what comes from within, which is important. This morning's lections omitted the little section in which Jesus says, "Whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile." Those words are followed by a little editorial comment – thus he pronounced all foods clean – which has puzzled readers since, because if Jesus really did pronounce all foods clean, it is difficult to imagine that the controversies concerning food regulations, of which we read in the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles to the Corinthians, would actually have taken place.

Instead, Jesus seems to be making a more general point about action, intention and motive. Consider the rather depressing list of vices which he also mentions as coming from within – fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. Quite a collection of wrongdoing, and it's hard to suppose that any of us can look at that list and acquit ourselves of all of its errors. But those errors take their form in action, they are deeds or dispositions which affect others. Even pride and envy, which we might think are purely individual vices, are measured in contradistinction to others, and take their effects in some of the other things against which we are being warned – slander or deceit, for example.

As these false practices come from within us, so also their converse, the right ways of Christian living, begin in our hearts. Most actions are, needless to say, external to ourselves – most of what we do is physical, involves other people and the world around us, and takes its effect in that context. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with the external world, as some of the early Christian Gnostics tried to claim – if there were, we could make little sense of being human, and certainly very little sense of a God who chose himself to become human, to become something physical, in order to draw humanity into his own life.

Home is where the heart is, says the cliché. Jesus's complaint to the Pharisees is that their heart is not in the right place, that they have, as it were, disordered their priorities so that it is the external action which comes first, and then somehow affects the whole person, determines our desires, priorities, concerns, determines that our heart is not a heart of love. Those religious groups and denominations which have found difficulty with ritual and physical practice have not been slow to pick up on this. It is certainly true that lots of churches like ours can occasionally give the impression that they are rather better at being Anglo Catholic than they are at being Christian. If my priority is the externals of my praying and worshipping life, then there is clearly something wrong. However, Jesus's reminder that what shows itself externally comes from within, and from the very heart of each person,

can reassure us that actions of devotion and reverence can and should be as unashamedly Christian as acts of charity and generosity to others.

The relationship between internal and external will be played out literally in the next couple of days. St Giles Fair presents us with a very useful opportunity to raise funds for the parish whilst also providing useful and valuable goods and produce for those who visit our stall. The other and at least as important aspect of our contribution is, of course, the welcome of visitors and the encouragement of people to venture inside the church, perhaps for the first time. Standing outside, going into the community, as it were, we are in a position to draw people inside. In our so doing, visitors will discover more than the externals of our actions in buying and selling. They will discover that which makes us what we really are, a place of prayer and worship, the regular offering of the mass, the presence of Christ reserved in the blessed sacrament, a building which has witnessed to that presence over almost a thousand years. But it's not enough simply to be drawn in. It must be the case that what is internal, that which comes from within, gives life to the external, to the acts of faith and love.

Not just the next few days, but the next few weeks and months will be a significant time as we welcome new faces, new residents in Oxford, new students, new ordinands, and new clergy. We are, I think, rather

better at being friendly and welcoming than we used to be, and it's very rewarding to receive feedback to that effect. But the most important welcome thing of all, I suspect, is not any individual act, but the existence and the growth of a living, worshipping, praying community, a community which is honest and committed in its pilgrimage of faith, which is anxious to know more of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and which enacts that pilgrimage of growth in faith and learning by the basic but essential practice of the life of the church – day by day in quiet simplicity, week by week in mystery and majesty. Every single one of us plays our part in this open-ness, in this mission, in this welcome to the external world, and we must do it from within our hearts.