

### **The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity – 30<sup>th</sup> August 2015**

Yesterday, when journeying backwards and forwards from weddings, I had Radio 5 playing on my car stereo. There happened to be a live football match on the commentary and it just happened to be my beloved Arsenal playing Newcastle. In the end they won by one own goal and Newcastle also had a player sent off. The commentators were mixed in their evaluation. Anyhow, subsequently I met a number of people who felt the need to bring up the game. Each relaying to me how lucky Arsenal had been and how they had needed to rely on an own goal to win the game. Each time I heard myself defending them, stating just how many shots they missed and trying to give the general impression that Arsenal had played well. Deep down, I knew all along that I was living in a world of self-deception and if I were honest Arsenal had been rather rubbish.

Sometimes the Gospel speaks to our inner psyche and challenges us in quite a remarkable way. Self-deception features heavily in today's readings.

Let us look at our reading from Mark:

What is the message that Jesus is giving when talking about these ancient food laws? People have died keeping these laws. The Jews are God's chosen people and they have been given the privilege of the Law to help them aspire to holiness. Jesus is a devout Jew. So why is he so lax regarding these laws?

What Jesus is revealing is that God is now calling all people, not just Jews, to belong to his kingdom. The laws are set down in scripture to help the Jews prepare their hearts to meet God in the coming Messiah – and they are now no longer needed.

In Christ, God is now dealing with the root disease, the problem resident in every human heart – its capacity to allow the influences of the world to corrupt it away from God, away from goodness and thus away from his protection and eternal salvation. The Law had limited humanity's self-destructive tendencies and restrained their insatiable propensity for wrongdoing, but such external controls were not able to return human hearts to God, only stop them from venturing as far away as they otherwise might. Only right internal integrity and intention could begin to bring humanity back to the safety of the creator – return humans into the radiating pool of his goodness and grace.

Heaven is breaking in because of the goodness of Christ, the God-man, God in human frame. The Old Testament provides signposts towards the coming Messiah and the eternal splendour he would bring. In Christ, all is fulfilled, and more besides. No matter how good the signposts are, they are not needed once you have reached your destination. In Christ the destination of the journeying people of God is reached and the Laws of the Old Testament are no longer needed.

The verses from James' letter that we have just heard speak of eternal truths: 'Be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves'. The ability of the early Apostles to recognise the

depths of the human condition are profound. If we are honest, we are all prone to self-deception, we all fall into the trap of hearing the word and not responding, or convincing ourselves that we cannot do any more than we are already doing, or even that God may not wish us to. I don't know about you, but how I anguish day by day because of my personal propensity to such deception. James has none of it; 'Be doers of the word and not hearers who deceive themselves.'

Then he reveals a little more in our hearing. 'Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world'. So then, James gives us more depth in our interpretation of Jesus' words regarding the eating laws and practices. These laws no longer lead us to God, for our own propensity to self-deception means that we are inclined to do them for the wrong reasons, use them for our own purposes and not to reveal the kingdom.

So James suggests that TRUE religion has two facets:

The first is action in the world - 'to care for orphans and widows in their distress' is the example James uses.

And...

The second is resisting the wickedness and corruption of the world – he pleads with us, 'to keep ourselves unstained by the world'.

These two things combined make up a transformative faith, one which allows our hearts to be changed, challenged and grow towards the goodness of God as seen in and through Jesus Christ. Helping the poor and those in need combined with a resilience to worldly distractions so that one can talk openly to God in prayer, silence and worship, opens the way to eternal life by the bestowing of heavenly values within our hearts. These are the values we see in Christ. And witnessing his example, we are given the confidence that we can fulfil all that he calls us to.

Jesus is the miracle cure for the terminally ill world and the radiant splendour he brings is so attractive that we can barely approach him because of his magnificence. But approach him we must. Without him we become objects of our own self-gratification, and we are destined to chaos, disorder and despair. But with him we have meaning, we begin to feel that we have a worth and suddenly there is order and purpose for our lives. As we return, we begin to feel the warmth of a lost child returning home. We were made to fit his embrace and be cradled in his arms.

Amen.

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