

Human Rules and Unchangeable Doctrine

A sermon preached at Summertown United Reformed Church on Sunday 30th August 2015 by the Rev'd Dr Rob Gilbert

Deuteronomy 4:1-2,6-9; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

Today's gospel reading is one of those passages that reminds us quite sharply that Jesus was very like us in some important ways, because he was, like us, a human being. It is very hard, I think, to imagine a religious leader today – except perhaps for Pope Francis – speaking about something so earthy as how we eat in the terms that Jesus does. In fact, of course, in some verses left out of the excerpt read this morning, Jesus makes the straightforward point that food ends up in the sewer. It is very hard to think of Justin Welby making that kind of point in an argument, though as I say Pope Francis possibly might, he's that kind of a chap, straight-talking. Like Jesus.

For me, this passage from Mark's gospel is one of those bits of Jesus's teaching that reminds me that one of the main features of his mission was to *demythologise* life, to *desacralize* reality. Not to try and argue that really the world is secretly full of magic, but to try and argue that it is much more ordinary, much more regular, than some people have liked to think. This is why modern science could only have arisen in the wake of Christianity.

This would be news to those critics of Christianity who want to treat our faith as if its view of the world is much the same as that of people who believe in fairies, or that thunder is caused by the gods walking on the clouds (believe me, I have heard AC Grayling speak about Christianity in just this kind of way). But it is a very simple fact – Jesus's teaching and his death and resurrection enable us see the world as created by God, which means set free by God to be itself, rather than that the world is *controlled* by God or indeed by sprites or demons or what have you. To say God created the world is to claim that God has given it freedom.

So the first thing to take home from today's Gospel is that Jesus wants us to see ourselves in an ordinary way, which means (and this is why he was giving this teaching) that we are free to make our own choices and take responsibility for our own actions. So it *might* be a good idea to wash your hands if you have been in the garden or the lab, or for any other reason to do with actual cleanliness, but for goodness' sake don't do it because you think it's the law to perform that particular ritual. Children need to wash their hands often, because they get grubby, but not for any other reason: and indeed this ordinary view of the world that Jesus is proclaiming is a *childlike* view. You'll remember that Jesus was rather keen on us adopting childlike attitudes. Children don't ask for magical explanations of things that happen, they want ordinary, mechanical kinds of explanations. When my nephew was younger he asked of someone we were talking about who had died, "Where'd he die to?" Noah expected an instrumental, physical kind of explanation not a magical one.

Now, since we *are* ordinary, that means we are all equal, all on the same level, so we should avoid passing judgement on one another. *Not judging* others is another of Jesus's best known teachings, and when he quotes Isaiah saying that people teach human precepts as doctrines he's referring to the fact that people seem not to be able to avoid judging one another. We make all sorts of human rules, or precepts, and that's something we need to do to make society work, to protect the vulnerable, to help young people to grow, to help adults flourish. But, for goodness sake, Jesus is saying, don't treat your rules as doctrines. They are just rules, and of course rules can be changed.

When I was preparing for this morning's sermon I asked myself if there were any examples I could think of of people treating human precepts as doctrines today. I'm afraid that the examples that popped into my head were some politicians. I think there is a temptation in our political life for a human precept – a rule, a regulation, a particular judgement as to how to fix the economy or deal with immigration – to gain the status of a doctrine. To gain the status of being "true" in some absolute kind of way. I guess that fuels the passion

with which politicians argue, which might be a good thing, but I am unconvinced it helps us to work out what is the best way (or the least bad way) to go. After all, when politicians, when governments or opposition parties come up with new or proposed precepts it is influenced often by what is expedient or “possible” or politically necessary; what can be achieved given public opinion. I do not think this always serves the goal of working out the best (or least bad) course of action to take.

As Christians, we are asked to try not to think in these terms. If a particular goal is politically unachievable then I can see it might be better to aim lower in the hope of gaining improvement in policy or law by another route. But, as Christians, we are asked to do our best to take a radically different point of view.

For this reason I am glad when our church leaders speak out – our bishops and others in this country, and the Pope – and when the church offers something concrete to improve the lives of people, to break the political stalemate. Such as supporting the Living Wage campaign, and the Church of England’s Credit Champions scheme working to find better, juster forms of borrowing in opposition to Wonga and the like; such as working with food banks and credit unions, such as the Church Urban Fund, the Children’s Society, Christian Aid, Oxfam – we can see how when Christians speak out good things happen. I wish our church leaders spoke out more.

What would they say? You could say that it’s their place to name and highlight inequality and injustice and cruelty and greed and self-interest – and that it’s the politician’s job to address these challenges. And of course it’s important to remind ourselves that we confess our sins in church as a central part of our services because we ourselves know that we are not blameless by any means, and as a way to try and reduce hypocrisy in ourselves. Doubtless we all make human judgements into doctrines, one way or another, but confession gives us an opportunity to name the ways we have, say sorry for it and try and do something about it.

The message which Christians preach when they challenge governments and politicians of all kinds is helpfully summed up for us by St James in his letter read this morning:

“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”. That is, to care for, and preach or talk about care for, the orphan, the widow, the stranger, the prisoner, the homeless person and the migrant. I think we and our church leaders need to just keep on trying to get this message across, the need to care for all these people. This is scriptural teaching, after all, and Jesus’s teaching – repeatedly the orphan, the widow, the homeless person, the alien at your gates, are spoken about as being those for whom we should care, deeply.

James has much else that is wonderful to hear, to say in the passage for this morning – I have always loved the directness with which we hear him using the simple analogy of someone looking in the mirror who then forgets what they saw – and among them is something which balances what I’ve said about our being ordinary. He says that if we are both hearers and doers of the word – putting care into action – then we become a kind of first fruits of God’s creatures, we become (if you like) extra-ordinary – God’s people who blossom early, God’s people who bear fruit abundantly.

So, we have a choice – being free, we have a choice – and the choice is whether to try and live as kind of first fruits of God’s creatures, or not. Whether to seek to live pure and undefiled by the world, or not. Whether to treat human rules and judgements with the respect they deserve, or to elevate them into doctrines. Our reading from Deuteronomy talks about the law as something that does not change, but this is supposed to be God’s law, not human precepts, and we know that in the end it is not so very hard – it is to love God and our fellow human beings with all our heart, all our mind, all our soul, all our strength. The law might be fixed and unchanging but in the end it is also simple – to live in conscious love and respect for all people. As Christians we are bound to believe that, whatever is said about us now, to do so is to lead a wise and discerning life and that in the end the world will be astounded by the wisdom and discernment of

compassion, even if for now compassion may be seen by some as weak and unrealistic. As Christians we are committed to pursuing the wisdom and discernment of compassion in whatever ways we can.

Amen.