

## **The Heart - Beyond Roles and Rules**

Mark 7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23 (and Proverbs 21: 1-8, 13, 21)

Humans are not islands. We are born into families, and into communities. As one is growing up, we see people playing roles, and we fit into some roles quite naturally and easily, and at the same time give serious thought to some roles while adopting them, and adapting them as well. Similarly with rules. There are many rules, laws, and conventions that shape us without us being properly aware, and there are certain customs that we practice and even enforce in the family and workplaces. There are times when we face one set of **roles** which come into conflict with another set, and one set of **rules** in conflict with another. What do we do then? A most recent example of how the use of rules could land a country and democracy very close to a constitutional crisis happened in the US last November just after the Presidential election results were declared. Attempts were made by the President who lost the election **to stay** in power by using top level Justice department officials, and some top officials of swing states to put out false statements about the counting of votes. Fortunately the Justice department officials in particular who were tasked with being guardians of the rule of law stood their ground. What narrowly helped the rule of law and democracy from collapsing was the integrity and courage of the Justice officials. Rules and Roles are necessary, but what protects and saves democracy is **conscience, the work of the heart** that roots us strongly in truth, in spiritual foundations.

In today's gospel reading the disciples did not wash hands before eating. Some rule of their inherited tradition was broken. The Pharisees and scribes cleverly tied together rules and roles and asked, Why do your disciples, your special group, not follow the traditions of the elders? So they implied that by failing to wash hands which is a prescribed and honoured rule, the whole Jesus-movement is discredited. Jesus responds with a couple of lines from the prophet Isaiah: **These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.** What Jesus is calling his accusers and his listeners to do at this point is to go beyond what is the "done thing" in a situation and evaluate it in the light of God's heart. We can recall Jesus engaging people in this kind of reflection many times. One thing Jesus points out in the Sermon on the Mount is, when you pray don't just do the ceremonial prayer standing in the synagogues but pray after you enter into the privacy of your room, opening your heart to God. What Jesus suggests is not to create a split between the external and the internal. There is no undermining of the external as well. Actions are important. To this effect Jesus

said in another instance that **calling** Lord Lord will not lead you to actualize the kin-dom, but that **doing** God's will will take you to that space, that experience. External actions are not inferior to what is deeper and internal. They are integral to each other in people who are moved by the Spirit. Awakening of the spirit within always leads to participating in the world in a caring and even cross-bearing way.

When the Pharisees emphasize the importance of washing of hands, are they insisting on good hygiene? Our Covid 19 pandemic with its new variants has shown us the importance of hand sanitizers in more situations than just preparing to sit for a meal. The pandemic has shown us that many external protocols help us stay safe and contain the spread of the virus. However knowledge and decision-making within us are needed to follow external protocols as closely as possible. Any laxity or half-hearted response to public health rules are often the reason why addressing the pandemic becomes harder. Jesus points out that the heart is a key player for one's relationship with God and also for a meaningful life in the world.

What we refer to as the spiritual heart is deep and hidden, and so we don't try to access it in a sustained way. The famous psychologist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Carl Jung, whose thought touch many fields in the humanities said: **Your vision will become clear only when you can look into your own heart. Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes.** We can testify from our own experience that when we only look outside we are attracted to some things, we hate some things. When we look at too many things at once we are confused; when pressures from the outside act on us we have difficulty in coping. When colonialists of the past, capitalists and the power-hungry look at the outside world, they dream of possessing it, controlling it, and manipulating it – some of which are most likely the cause of climate change. Looking inside in contrast makes us alive, makes us relate to the world with interest and gently. Being in touch with the heart makes us see people and the natural world as essential and engaging partners. The heart provides us with the ability to reach out with interest and care, and the desire to build peace and community. A well-known saying of Jesuit **Pierre Teilhard de Chardin is: We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience.** Essentially our spiritual heart is alive like our physical pumping heart, and the heart is seeking expression. It is often our unreadiness and unwillingness to engage the heart that a fuller way of being human remains hidden. The 14 cent. Mystic Meister Eckhart said that "we are the Word of God and the Book about God". In other words, our

hearts bear the image of God and is bursting to enflesh God. And we are tasked to enflesh the love and grace of God in many many forms. Our presence, words and actions are meant to be God's beautiful gifts to the world.

Jesus utters in very strong terms that the religious practice in Judaism at that time simply discarded the Commandment of God and established the tradition of elders in its place. What such human-made rules offer is a very strong identity. Identity by itself is not a bad thing. We identify with a family, a community, with a church family. Such an identity through connection offers care and inspiration, and offers opportunities for personal growth and service through its outreach arms. However, if that identity starts to claim superiority, and exclusivity, then it has started showing signs of stagnation, and failed to appreciate other identities and the opportunities for inclusion.

People can start making boundaries, and even boasting about their brand. At such times Jesus' words, "What goes inside from the outside does not defile" should keep ringing in the ears of people.

In this passage the Pharisees and Scribes together attack Jesus' disciples. However the Pharisees as a group had the reputation of being a "reform" focussed group. They were a group who tried to see the truth behind the letter of the law. So, actually they should have been natural allies to Jesus' mission. But instead they attacked Jesus. This tells us how easy it is even for a reform-minded, liberation-focussed group at one point in time to become rigid. It is also the case that when one is not focussed on being in touch with one's heart, in touch with the Spirit, the externals become our point of reference; the externals define who we are; and we can even begin to use the externals as standards for measuring others, other systems, other faiths. Exclusive identity can turn Patriotism into something toxic, into dividing people. Identity when applied to a particular way of worshipping God, with promises of exclusive blessings from God is dangerous, and has nothing to do with the kingdom of God or kin-dom of God that Jesus taught. Recently I noticed a couple of websites in India which are presenting a distorted history of India, a distorted view of religions except one, and projecting one religion, one community and one party as truly Patriotic. It is hard to believe how journalists, actors and public figures with credentials will go on these channels and speak for 5 or 10 minutes on subjects they have no expertise in and spread misinformation. And this is what the first reading from the Book of Proverbs warns against, particularly the line which equates a lying tongue to a deadly snare. Identity and exclusivity were problems in Jesus' time and they are in our time too. In another

instance Jesus went a step further in doing what was unclean in the eyes of the then Judean religious leaders. And this will sound crude and gross to modern ears. In the very next chapter Mark presents Jesus as meeting a blind man, and Jesus spits on his eyes and touches his eyes with his hand. Jesus puts his hand a second time on the man's eyes. In John's gospel Jesus also puts mud on the man's eyes. Here Jesus confronts the clean-unclean distinction and discriminatory practice head on. He transforms crude body fluids mixing into suggesting the importance of the restorative function. There is a graphic dismantling of rigid boundaries to suggest intimacy and harmony. And we see that in this dismantling of the exclusion rule there is healing, there is wholeness, there is new life.

What came forth from Jesus was healing and liberation.

May our hearts be alive and set in motion healing and wholeness.

May the Spirit bless us in our efforts towards inclusion.

Thanks be to God. Amen