

This is a complex passage. It's conceived difficult, but because we don't share the cultural background of the protagonists in the story, the Jewish Jesus is caught up with a heated debate with the Jewish leaders of the day about the niceties of the Jewish law. We don't quite get it. And Mark, the gospel writer clearly knew that his Gentile readers would struggle, which is why throughout the passage, he puts in little explanations in brackets to help us understand what the story is about. However, it is technical and complex, but it's not too difficult to see the thrust of the stories. The main theme is obviously about cleanliness or rather purity and holiness. The Jewish leaders, the Pharisees, had developed the Old Testament Mosaic law into a whole religious system. They'd added to the laws originally given in Deuteronomy with a whole load of different, extra laws and traditions. They had laws for everything, how they wash their hands, their pots, their kettles.

And the Pharisees in particular were known for the assiduous way in which they followed each of these laws and traditions. Nothing brought them more pleasure in fact, than keeping the laws because it gave them the satisfaction of knowing that they were doing the right thing. They thought they'd been so clever in devising a religious system that they thought would keep God happy, keep them pure with minimum inconvenience to themselves. But what we see here in this passage and throughout the gospels in fact is Jesus tangling with the Pharisees because he fundamentally opposed their understanding of the religious life as simply being about following religious laws. In Jesus' understanding they corrupted the Old Testament revelation of God, by simply reducing it to a set of rules to follow.

When Jesus appears at the start of the gospels, he doesn't say, "follow these rules". He simply says, "follow me". It's not about what rules you follow it's about who you follow. The Pharisees, and actually we all have a bit of a pharisaical tendencies in all of us, we all want to control matters by taking care of external things and controlling the things

we can control. But Jesus encourages us to do something far riskier, to think about the internal affairs of the heart. It's about getting to know Jesus and walking His ways. That's the call that He's encouraging His followers to pursue. I've heard it described like this. The Pharisees and that particular and similar religious traditions are spelt, the religion they follow, is spelled D-O, it's all about doing the right things to please God. Whereas the New Testament faith that comes in Jesus is spelled D-O-N-E. It's not about what we do. It starts by celebrating what Jesus has *done* for us. He lived the perfect life and died a death that deals with our wrongdoing, and our sin, and our faith. Our religious spiritual life as Christians comes as a response to that foundational act. We follow and respond to His obedience, love, and sacrifice, which was the theme, what I was saying last week. Do you remember where Paul in Ephesians talks about sit, walk, and stand. And I mentioned the importance of that, that we're invited to sit with God first, to rest in his presence, to receive the gift of his grace. And it's from that position of rest of being seated with him that were then called to get up and walk and follow him and walk his ways. Not because we're walking and doing what He would have us do to earn His favor, but in response to what He has done for us already. Jesus says, forget religion, try faith. Come follow me. The way to cleanliness and to holiness is found following me, Jesus says.

So how do we do that? It's not actually immediately clear from this passage because the passage that we've set for today is just framed in terms of what makes us unclean. It doesn't actually go on to say, what makes us clean? It's clear though, from the passage that nothing from outside could make us unclean and it ends with listing all the things, the unclean things that can come out of someone. But what makes us clean? What stops us walking down that way of evil and the things that we would rather not be doing? Well, there are clues in the text. In fact, there's one particular word that comes a couple of times, which is the beginning of the answer to that question. And it's the word heart. It says, these

people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. And then Jesus goes on to say, for it is from within the human heart that evil intentions come. It's the heart, which is the key.

What Jesus is looking for is not external observance, but the internal transformation of the heart and that move is predicted in the Old Testament. God says to the people, through the prophet Ezekiel, "A new heart, I will give you. And a new spirit, I will put within you and I will remove from your body, the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." What we see in this gospel set for today is Jesus encouraging His followers to claim that promise, to open themselves up to the divine heart surgeon, to have new and clean hearts, hearts that are not far from God.

And I'm reminded of that great Psalm we say together every Ash Wednesday, Psalm 51, which begins "Create in me a new heart, oh God, a renewed Spirit put within me." Notice how the Psalmist isn't praying that God will help him try harder. He's asking God to do the work. "Create in me a clean heart", he says. Let me be open to that work. We could join the Psalmist in making that same request and prayer to God.

I love Paul's prayer in the book of Galatians. "That in Christ, He may come and dwell in your heart through faith." That's an amazing promise, that Christ will come and dwell in our hearts through faith.

And I want to end by someone who was blessed to know that experience and wrote about it beautifully, St. Augustine. And we know about his life experience because he wrote what's reckoned to be the first autobiography in his Confessions. And he talks there about his journey to faith and the importance of Christ coming to dwell in his heart, in his story. He lived a very colorful life. In his youth he most definitely wasn't a Christian. He says of those years, "the sound of your secret melody I could not catch. No matter how hard I tried, my heart was deafened by the din of my mind."

Then in midlife, his life was turned around by the realization that God was not far off. He realized that God does come close to us and even dwells within us. He asks, "why do we rush about the top of heaven and the bottom of the earth, looking for Him who is here at home with us. If only we could be at home with Him." Famously, he said, "You God made us so that we long for you and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you."

Augustine realized that the God he'd been searching for, resided, dwelt within his heart. He discovered the wonder of a heart made new by Christ coming to dwell within it. He said, "God made me shut the door of my secret chamber to pray in secret, that is the soundless secret place of my heart. For I pray to Him in the silence of my heart." God renewed St. Augustine's heart by His Spirit. His heart was cleansed. May that be true for us too. May we say with the Psalmist, "Create in me a clean heart, Oh God. And put a new and right Spirit within me." Amen.