

Sermon Matins 14 July 2019

Genesis 32 v 22-30 and Mark 7 v 1-8

In the Old Testament lesson this morning we read that God changed Jacob's name to Israel because he wrestled with God. But in the New Testament lesson we find God wrestling with men when the Pharisees criticise Jesus for allowing his disciples to eat food without first washing their hands.

It is said that cleanliness is next to godliness. And as a mother and grandmother I have attempted to instil common-sense rules about hygiene into my children. For example, washing hands before meals and handling food.

Similarly, when I was appointed a hospital chaplain, on my induction day I was asked to wash my hands and then place them under a UV light monitor which revealed to my dismay how much bacteria remained even after washing. This exercise was followed with a lesson on how to wash the hands thoroughly and most importantly between each finger. Thus, minimising the risk of infection in hospital wards.

At first thought the Pharisees criticism might appear all rather trivial. But in Jewish Law there were rigorous rules about hand washing, although not necessarily in the interests of hygiene but for ceremonial reasons. Jewish Law stated that before every meal, and between each course, the hands had to be washed in a certain way.

For purification purposes the water for washing was kept in special large stone jars. And was checked meticulously to ensure it wasn't used for any other purpose, that nothing had fallen into it or had been mixed with it.

The hands were first held with fingertips pointing upwards and water was poured over them running down to the wrists. The minimum amount of water used was one quarter of a log, the equivalent of 1 and a half eggshells of water.

Each palm of the hand had to be rubbed with the fist of the other. But this meant that at this stage the water on the hands was now tainted because it had touched unclean hands. Therefore, the hands then had to be held with fingertips pointing downwards and water poured over them from the wrists so that every part was rinsed clean.

Under Jewish Law, to fail to do this was to be guilty of not only being unclean in human eyes but worst of all unclean in the sight of God. The Law stated that the man who ate with unclean hands was vulnerable to spiritual attack, poverty and destruction. A Rabbi who once omitted ritual handwashing was duly excommunicated.

Ancient Jewish Law was first instituted through the Ten Commandments and the first five books of the Old Testament which contained a number of detailed regulations in order to live a godly life.

But by the fourth century BC there emerged legal experts called Scribes, who were obsessed with definition. They amplified the Law resulting in thousands of rules and regulations governing every possible situation in life. This became known as the Oral Law or the tradition of the elders.

To the Scribes and Pharisees these rules and regulations were the core of religion. To observe them was to please God; to break them was to commit sin.

It was little wonder then that Jesus was so unpopular with the Pharisees because he taught that forgiveness and loving God and our fellow man was more important than their rules.

He called them hypocrites because they were enforcing laws that were impossible to keep. Jesus stated – ‘The Pharisees load people down with burdens they can hardly carry and don’t lift a finger to help them’. Thus, Jesus was attacking a system that placed man-made rules before human need.

St Augustine taught that while the law guides us to live well, we cannot attain salvation through obeying the law alone. It’s only through God’s grace that we can be saved. Grace is the love and mercy shown to us by God. It is God’s gift to us and there is nothing we can do to earn it.

Last week’s Songs of Praise unusually featured the Glastonbury music festival. Headlining the main stage was a young Grime artist called Stormzy whose hit song ‘I’m blinded by your grace’ is a powerful rap referring to his dramatic conversion from violent gang culture to faith in God.

For the uninitiated ‘Grime’ is a genre of rap music with lyrics that focus on the dark side of urban life and gang culture. Academic scholars have hailed it as the “most significant and influential musical development within the UK for decades”, because it critiques, poverty, crime, racism and the politics that allow such deprivation to continue in our society.

It’s not a style I would encourage because of its use of bad language and descriptions of violence. But I can understand the frustration behind the lyrics. While watching my daughter run the London Marathon this year I got lost and wandered onto an estate in London’s East End, with dismal tower blocks, boarded up shops covered in graffiti, and countless homeless people sleeping in doorways. There were gangs lingering about the streets and I found it both extremely sad and intimidating.

And I realised there but for the grace of God go I. Men women and children have to wake up to this site every morning. Some may like living there while others may find it a living hell. I then realised how much I take for granted. I live in a relatively safe city surrounded by my family and friends. I belong to a beautiful cathedral, I have amazing support from the clergy, vergers and congregation. I listen to inspirational sermons and sincere prayers from the heart. I am touched to the depths of my soul through the beautiful singing of the choir. For me the grace of God is truly amazing.

The theologian Philip Yancey writes about this amazing grace of God. But he also talks about ‘un-grace’ – describing people who represent the God of the Pharisees by being judgemental, intimidating and ungracious towards others, even in church.

Yancey states:

“Grace means there is nothing I can do to make God love me more, and nothing I can do to make God love me less. It means that I, even I who deserve the opposite, am invited to take my place at the table in God’s family.”

It is only through the death of Jesus on the cross that we receive forgiveness and this amazing gift of grace from God. How much more then should we show grace to others.