

Sunday Homily

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

29 AUGUST 2021

YEAR B

“You abandon the commandment of God
and hold to human tradition.”

Mark 7:8

Illustration

It was a filthy Sunday morning – rain and strong winds. Meg Smith, the vicar, slipped inside the church door an hour before the service was due to start, to be sure the boiler was working.

She was followed in by Jim Markham, who organised their small town’s monthly farmers’ market. He was distraught. It was going to be impossible to hold the market in these conditions but he was reluctant to cancel because the market had become a lifeline for local farmers. Would Meg use her local knowledge to find a building where the market could find a refuge?

She rang the caretaker of every large building in the town, but no one could help. Just then John Stocks, churchwarden, arrived. Meg took John aside and the two of them spoke in low voices for a few moments, with John nodding vigorously. Then Meg turned to Jim and pinched herself as she heard herself say: “Jim, would it be possible for you to hold the farmers’ market here in church?” It was – and they did.

Gospel Teaching

Pharisees from Jerusalem were shocked to see how people in the provinces disregarded the Law of Moses. They asked Jesus to explain how he could let his disciples so blatantly disregard the traditions of their religion.

The Pharisees probably weren’t trying to trick Jesus here. They were genuinely troubled. And they were right to be, for an institution can become so dependent on its traditions for its sense of identity and worth that if they were all stripped away, like barnacles off a ship’s hull, it might reveal so many holes that the ship would sink.

Jesus cleverly draws on the words of one of their “elders” that the Pharisees are invoking and he quotes Isaiah 29, where God deplores the hypocrisy of Israel. It is a devastating prophecy and cuts right to the quick of the Pharisees’ complaint. For God calls the worship of Israel a vain show and her doctrines merely based

on human precepts. There can be no more crushing critique of a religion than for its worship to be judged as show and its teaching a human invention.

What added to the power of this quote is that it was eight hundred years old! If Judaism had barnacles of tradition clinging to its hull all those centuries ago, what must its condition have been like as Jesus debated the point with these religious leaders? How was it able to stay afloat?

Jesus is ruthless in answering this implicit question: “You abandon”, he says, “the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.” What is left of a religion once it has abandoned God and replaced him with human traditions? Nothing! According to Jesus’ judgement, therefore, the ship had sunk beneath the waters long ago. No wonder he was crucified.

Jesus then calls the people around him to hear his answer to the specific complaint of the Pharisees concerning dietary and cooking traditions: nothing that goes into a person’s stomach will defile them, only what comes out of their heart. In that one brilliant statement Jesus places all religion where it should be: within our beliefs, desires, thoughts and intentions – and the actions that result from them. God only ever wanted contrite hearts and a people that treated the weak and the stranger justly. Jesus in this instance is repeating the age-old message of the prophets.

Application

Jesus accused the religious leaders of using human traditions to enslave people with the excessive demands of institutionalised religion, but ironically the same process has happened in the Christian religion.

We have to spend so much time just keeping the Church afloat and yet how willing are we to take a knife to the barnacles of tradition that weigh us down? Maybe we need to be more willing to listen to the prophetic voices of unchurched newcomers? Sometimes the only way is for change to be forced upon us: for instance, when their building undergoes a major repair and they have to worship elsewhere, congregations often find a new spiritual life granted them in the new environment.

Fortunately there are plenty of good signs: for example, the growing involvement of congregations in issues of peace and fair trade; our reduced dependence on service books, allowing for more creativity and spontaneity in worship; and the reordering of our churches to make them more suitable for community use – though it will probably be a while before the farmers’ market is traditionally held in the parish church!