**Things from the heart defile, not food** 24/3/24dkm

Read: Mark 7:1-23, Acts 10:1-23

Text: Mark 7:14-23

Psalms: 24, 1, 15, 72old

The other night we watched a comic video clip on the TV. A Jewish family was driving through a Palestinian enclave when they crashed right outside a convent. The nuns had taken a vow of silence, but they answered the knock at the door. The Jewish man wanted to call for help, but because it was now the Sabbath he could not touch the phone. The nun taking the vow of silence dialled the phone for him. They brought the man a drink but when he looked up he saw a leg of ham hanging in the kitchen. It was funny, but on reflection it is sad that so many people focus on food and fasting, on what they wear, and on other man-made rituals, in their effort to please God.

A delegation of Pharisees, with some scribes, came from Jerusalem to deal with this renegade rabbi call Jesus. Jesus had a huge following, but he was breaking the traditions of the elders. It did not take long for them to find fault with Jesus, or with his disciples. They confronted Jesus about his disciples failing to wash their hands before eating. Washing of hands was a matter of ritual not hygiene; contamination was not from dirt but from touching a Gentile!

After calling the Pharisees hypocrites, and showing them how their rule about ‘Corban’ was being used to override the law of God, the Pharisees, it seems, went back to Jerusalem to plot how to destroy Jesus. The crowd following Jesus appear to have withdrawn during this confrontation with the Pharisees because Jesus now calls them back. Jesus wanted them to understand what he was telling the Pharisees. He wanted them to know why he did not insist on ceremonial washings.

Ceremonial washing was as central to the religion of the Jews as food itself. Mark helps us to understand something of the various washing rituals devised by the Pharisees in verses 3-4. Jesus had something profound and revolutionary to say about such practices, and wanted everyone to listen and understand. What Jesus says may seem obvious to us, but it was not obvious to the Jews, or to millions of people in the world today, Jew and Gentile. Every religion, apart from Christianity, believes that certain foods are prohibited because they make us unclean in the eyes of God.

**1. Jesus speaks to the people**

Jesus was not arguing over a minor legal issue in order to get back at the Pharisees, the religious leaders. He was dealing with a fundamental salvation issue. The Pharisees were putting their tradition above the word of God, and God’s word is truth (John 17:17). Moreover, God’s word focuses on the heart, not on outward things. The ceremonial law was still in place, but it was given as a pointer to Christ, and would soon be defunct. The law was given as a tutor to bring us to Christ (Gal 3:24). Jesus wanted the people to understand that no one is defiled by what they eat or how they wash; no one is saved by keeping the law (7:14).

‘It is not what goes into the mouth but what comes out of the mouth that defiles a person’ said Jesus, as recorded by Matthew (Mat 15:11); Mark has very similar words in verse 15. Jesus did not elaborate here in teaching the crowd, but he does a little later in teaching his disciples (7:18). People may have pure hands but polluted hearts. The Lord is more concerned about the cleanness of our heart than the cleanness of our hands! Having clean hands is a health issue but clean hearts is a moral, and spiritual or salvation issue. We should pay more attention to what we think and say, and less about what we eat.

The obvious fact is, everything that goes into your mouth passes into the stomach, where nutrients to nourish your body are extracted, and the residue ends up in the toilet. Does food cause us to commit sin? Some say ‘yes’ because they are looking for anything to excuse them of their sin. Some think, and say, ‘You are what you eat’, but are meat-eaters more likely to break the law than vegetarians- of course not! Alcohol and drugs affect our minds, of course, and can lead to sin, but Jesus was speaking in general; besides, drunkenness is a sin. Only a fool would say he murdered or stole or told a lie because of what he ate! Only a fool thinks that what he eats, or does not eat, makes him acceptable to God.

**2. Jesus speaks to his disciples**

After this confrontation with the Pharisees from Jerusalem, and then speaking to the crowd, Jesus and his disciples found privacy in a house, probably the place where he stayed when in Capernaum. Matthew records Peter telling Jesus, ‘The Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying’ (Mat 15:12). Being offended meant they understood what he said to them! There is no inoffensive way of condemning false teaching. Remember what the apostle Paul said about those who insisted on circumcision (Gal 5:12). Those who deny the truth of the gospel, or the deity of Christ, must be condemned. Jesus gave no apology for offending those who nullified the commands of God.

Mark does not include this comment from Peter, or the answer given by Jesus, but he does include the next question asked by Peter as the spokesman of the group; although Mark does not mention Peter by name (7:18, Mat 15:15). In the privacy of their home, the disciples asked Jesus to explain the parable, the parable he had just told the crowd. After a brief rebuke for being so ‘dumb’, Jesus explained what he was talking about (7:18).

**3. Jesus declares all foods pure**

The idea of unclean foods was deeply ingrained into the thinking of all Jews, including and especially Peter (cf. Acts 10). In preparation for sending Peter to the house of a Gentile to tell him the way of salvation, the Lord spoke to Peter in a vision. Peter was dreaming about food, just before lunch, when he saw a sheet coming down from heaven. In the sheet were all sorts of animals, creeping things, and birds (Acts 10:12). Peter heard the voice of the Lord telling him to kill and eat, but Peter protested because some of the things in the sheet were unclean. His protest was met with a command, repeated three times: ‘What God has cleansed you must not call common’ or unclean (Acts 10:15). Peter got the message and went to the house of Cornelius!

Answering the question of Peter and the disciples about food and religious defilement, Jesus went over what he said to the crowd, namely, food that goes into the mouth, then the stomach, and finally passes out of the body as faeces, has nothing to do with the heart or the mind from which evil thoughts and actions come (7:18, 19). Who can argue with this profound yet simple conclusion? The Pharisees had been silenced, and now the disciples are silenced by Jesus, by the wisdom of God (1Cor 1:30).

No food that is eaten defiles or makes a person unclean before God: ‘Thus purifying all foods’ (7:19). Some translations put these words in parenthesis because they think this is Mark’s conclusion. It is in the inspired word of God so it matters not. We live in an age of great concern about what we eat- at least in our society. Every second person will tell you of some food that will kill you- apart from magic mushrooms! We have law-makers wanting to ban sugar and fast foods. A little while ago they wanted to ban butter. Our civil law-makers can ban whatever they like, but let not church leaders start declaring certain foods unclean, because Jesus declares all food clean. As I said at the beginning, millions of people still think that eating certain foods will defile them in the eyes of God. We have just learned that this is utter foolishness, because what you eat passes through your body and into the toilet. It is not a moral or spiritual matter, and is of no concern to God (cf. Col 2:16).

**4. A list of evils that come from the heart**

While God is not concerned about what goes into your mouth and out the other end, he is concerned about what comes out of your heart or mind, because out of the heart proceed evil thoughts and then evil words and actions (7:21). These are the things that defile a man in the eyes of God. These are the sins that separate us from God; no one was ever judged by God because of what they ate or did not eat; note that greed and gluttony are sinful, and drunkenness is also a sin.

God looks upon and judges the heart of man, because it from the heart that evil words and works proceed. The second table of the Ten Commandments lists words and works, and even thoughts, that are sinful. It does not refer to any particular food, or even to washing of hands before eating! Jesus has already referred the Pharisees to the fifth commandment about honouring parents (7:10). He now refers his disciples to murder, adultery and all sexual immorality, to stealing, to lying and deceit, to blasphemy or slander, and to coveting. Mark has Jesus listing the same sins as in Matthew’s gospel, but with six more; twelve compared to six (7:21, 22, Mat 15:19).

Jesus wanted his disciples to know what things really defile a person in the eyes of God. They knew the commandments and probably said they kept them- like the rich young ruler. But their focus was on the ceremonial law and on rituals. The tenth commandment, which says ‘Do not covet’, was a challenge for Paul the Pharisee, and Paul the Christian (Rom 7). This command in particular is about the heart, about thinking and lusting after things, like your neighbour’s wife, or house, or other things that belong to your neighbour. It is about having evil thoughts; and evil thoughts lead to evil actions. Coveting comes down the list recorded by Mark, as it does in the Decalogue, but it is at the heart of many sins.

Sexual immorality and adultery come first in Mark’s list. Sex outside of marriage is a sin against God. Evil thoughts or lusts lead to this sin. Jesus actually teaches that these lusts are sinful, because the person has already committed adultery in his heart (Mat 5:38). He is affirming this teaching here in these verses. Judging by headline news, we can put sexual sins at the top of the list still today. Hardly a day goes by when we do not hear of a case of sexual abuse or rape, sometimes leading to murder, the next sin on the list.

Murder comes before adultery in the Ten Commandments, and it comes before adultery in Matthew 5 also, where Jesus says that to be angry with a brother or sister without cause is tantamount to murder. Murder is frequently in the headlines, but a most sinister form of murder, that of the unborn child, is not regarded as illegal in our society. Theft is next on the list, as it is in the Decalogue. Slaves we tempted to steal from their masters in those days. The Jews probably said stealing from the Romans was okay! Too many people say that stealing from the boss or from the government is okay.

Covetousness we have mentioned as being like evil thoughts that proceed from the heart (7:21). The sins already mentioned start in the heart as covetous thoughts, although murder may start as pride and envy/evil eye (7:22). Pride is at the heart of many sins. Pride leads to jealousy, the fear of losing what one has, and to envy, being upset at seeing another have what you want. Envy was at the heart of Cain’s sin, and Saul’s deadly pursuit of David. Blasphemy or slander is sinful use of the tongue. James points to our tongue being an unruly evil, full of deadly poison (James 3:8).

Words, bitter or abusive words, can destroy a relationship in no time at all. We read of defamation cases in the news all the time. When we fail to control our tongue we are sinning against God. Too late, many realise the foolishness with which they have spoken or acted. If they had controlled their thoughts they might have controlled their actions. With the help of God’s commands, and God’s Spirit dwelling in our heart, we can control our thoughts, and hence our words and actions (Phil 4:8).

Eating or not eating certain foods is irrelevant. Washing or not washing hands is irrelevant. What we need is a washed heart, a new heart, and this is what Jesus came to give us. He does so through his death on the cross and gift of the Holy Spirit. He told a Pharisee called Nicodemus, and he tells you, ‘You must be born again’ (John 3:7).