

“GETTING IT IN PERSPECTIVE (Mark 22)”

Mark 7:1-23

We've spoken several times during our journey through Mark's story of Jesus' life and ministry about Jesus' "agenda". (It's actually a word I've noticed creeping into more and more articles and studies recently.) It all began with Jesus' invitation in the very first words Mark records him saying – "*Repent and believe the good news!*" We translated that as "*Give up your own agenda and trust me for mine.*" So far we have had a few hints as to what Jesus' agenda might be – hints that have been given through his actions as he has healed people and worked miracles, and through his words as he has spoken about the Kingdom of God, the rule of God being demonstrated as people and creation are renewed in the way the Hebrew prophets foretold.

And, as we have also seen, the proclamation of this new agenda, by words and in action, brings Jesus up against those who seem to have most to gain by sticking to the old way of doing things. Usually they are the Pharisees, the guardians of the tradition of the Jewish people, men who want to retain their status and position as the ones who know what needs to be done. If you can convince people that things have to be done in a certain way, and you are the only ones who know what that way is, you have a hold over the people that will always enable you to feed your appetite for power (cf Terry Pratchett's *Small Gods*). In the story we've just read, these Pharisees and other professional lawyers make the trip up from Jerusalem – then as now the seat of their power – to check out Jesus and his growing band of supporters. And in this story we have the starkest indication yet of what this new agenda is all about.

In the exchange of words here is a confrontation between the old and the new. Three times Mark restates the contrast. If you have your Bibles open to the passage we read, look at vv8,9,13. The Pharisees have fired the opening shot with their insistence (in v5) on "*the tradition of the elders*". The context here is that of washing of the hands before eating – something that they've noticed Jesus' disciples are not doing. Jesus then makes the comparison in the verses I mentioned between "*the commands of God*" and "*the traditions of men.*" Paradoxically, his new agenda goes back further than their old one – he goes back to God and they have built their agenda on the layers of tradition built up by human beings over the centuries.

As we've said, the context here is that of washing hands. It's nothing to do with hygiene: it's all to do with ritual. The idea was that they cleansed themselves of anything that was impure, unholy, non-kosher before they put their hands anywhere near their mouths. When they'd been to the market place (v4), there was the possibility that they could have touched something that was ritually unclean. They might have handled money that had been touched by a Gentile or brushed against something that had some kind of ritual uncleanness about it. If they didn't wash their hands, that impurity could find its way into their body and they'd end up defiled and unable to have anything to do with God.

There were so many of these things that were part of a tradition that had grown up over the centuries. The Mishnah – a kind of commentary on the Hebrew scriptures, a handbook to good practice of the Law – had an entire section devoted to cleanliness. It was important for these people. They didn't want to run the risk of falling out of favour with God. But Jesus says that these traditions are not the point of the Scriptures. Look at God's word, he says, and think about that rather than about the hundreds of rules and regulations that are supposed to bring you nearer to God, but actually take your attention away from him.

He quotes to the Pharisees themselves the example of people who try to get out of the obligation to care for their parents – a straightforward reading of the fifth commandment – by making a vow that all their property and wealth is devoted to God (and cannot therefore be used for anyone else). In v13 he actually says that they are using their tradition to override God's clear word to them: their own agenda is a means of manipulating God's.

He then expands a little on it to the crowd which has now gathered – and then has to explain further for the sake of his disciples when they go off into one of the houses. That’s obviously the nub of his message here in this story. What he is saying is that you cannot be contaminated by what goes into you. In other words, anything that you take into your body because you haven’t washed your hands is going to go into your stomach and eventually find its way out of the body without doing any long-term spiritual harm. The problem with the human condition, though, is what is already in there, in the heart. And it’s when that starts to find its way out of the body that you can see the damage being done.

What is it that defiles a person? he asks. Is it failing to stick to a tradition? Or is it harbouring attitudes that are at odds with God’s word? Clearly, it’s the latter. Look, he says, there are all these things that come out of a person’s heart, that have their root in his attitudes – evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder and the like. Don’t waste time on the peripherals, on the nit-picking, holier-than-thou traditions that have taken you so far away from God’s word. Get working on the things in that list: your attitudes, on the things that are deep within the flawed hearts of men and women, and which burst out because we have not been directing our efforts into the right places.

It’s not a problem that was confined to the Pharisees and their soul mates. Jesus quotes some lines from the prophecy of Isaiah (vv6,7). In the time of the prophet there were many people who seemed to do and say all the right religious things, who turned up at the place of worship at the right time, who offered all the right sacrifices, who said all the right words when called upon. But their attitudes were far from conforming to the kind of thing God wanted. Look at what he says to them in *Isaiah* 58, and what Isaiah’s predecessor had to say in *Amos* 8:4ff. These were people who did all the right things according to the tradition, their own agenda, but who fell a long way short when it came to God’s word, the agenda Jesus came to proclaim.

Oh, how smug we can feel when we look at these Pharisees! Isn’t it so easy to see where they’re going wrong? And how superior we are to the people of Amos’ and Isaiah’s day! But the problem is no different today. You don’t have to look too far to see the ways in which we have allowed tradition to usurp the place of God’s word in our lives and in our church. Whether it’s women and hats or the times of services or the things that we should be eating and drinking as Christians or the kinds of music we allow in worship or the words we use in our prayers – we have our own traditions. We like to do it all right on Sunday and make sure we’re seen to be making the right moves, heard to be making the right noises. And it’s not too long before that sense of tradition, “doing the right thing”, obscures our desire to hear what God is saying to us. We become so preoccupied with the things that **we** think matter, that we lose sight of the things God says matter.

It’s a part of the human condition, really. If we make the rules, we feel we are holding on to the power. If someone else makes them – even if that someone else is God – then we don’t feel so much in charge. Jesus had no time for such things, and he forcefully made his point when he called these Pharisees “*hypocrites*”. How that must have hurt! Because it hurts us, doesn’t it? Call me anything you like, except a hypocrite. But that is the name Jesus uses here for those who have laid a veneer of religiosity over a life full of untransformed attitudes. He’s pretty straight about it and there’s not really a great deal to explain here (it’s difficult for preachers when the message is already so direct). We’re just left with a question ringing in our ears – have you “*let go of the commands of God to hold on to the traditions of men*”? In other words, are you a hypocrite? That’s what it boils down to. Are you so intent on making the right moves and the right noises that you’ve actually forgotten what God wants you to do? Do you spend more time arranging meetings to discuss God’s work than actually doing God’s work? Do you spend so much time at meetings about God’s word that you don’t have time to read God’s word? Do you polish up your veneer of religiosity on Sundays so that it’s so thin by Monday that your real attitudes start to break through?

Jesus’ agenda is one of integrity and authenticity. He calls you to a life that is lived for him through and through, not just in here on Sunday, but wherever you are from Monday to Saturday. There’s no point

claiming to follow Jesus' agenda, if yours is always showing through. Perhaps we need to go back to the original word we find in our versions of Mark's story – *Repent*. Jesus called these Pharisees hypocrites. What would he call you?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How would you describe the agenda Jesus came to announce?
2. List some of the “*traditions of men*” that we hold on to today. How have they come about? What use are they?
3. Is all tradition wrong? Why/why not?
4. What are the main barriers to our living a life of integrity? What can we do about it?
5. Why don't we like to be called hypocrites?
6. What is the main thing you have learned from this passage?