

*Loving Father, may the words coming out of me this morning be your words to your people gathered here, and may the words coming out of all of us be your words to our families, friends and the community. Amen.*

### **INSIDE OUT?** (James 1.17-end; Mk 7.1-8, 14-15,21-23)

It's all about branding. Well-known names change. Norwich Union has become anonymous Aviva; part of the old British Rail has become Arriva (whether their trains actually arrive or not). Supermarkets are constantly revamping their packaging (and sometimes subtly reducing their sizes at the same time) – e.g. Tesco Basics (vanilla in flavour only) ice cream has now become “Ms Molly’s”. Firms must spend fortunes thinking up new names and repackaging and repainting.

But one item in the kitchen has stood the test of time. The Lyle’s Golden Syrup tin has kept the same format, with its catchphrase “*Out of the strong came forth sweetness*” (Judges 14.14).

I like that, as it chimes in with a verse from today’s Gospel. Jesus said, “*Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them*” (Mk 7.15).

I must confess to being more than a bit biased at the moment about what can come out of a human being. We praise God for our lovely ten-day old granddaughter. She arrived with the most beautiful long finger nails - anyone would think she had been attending a beauty parlour in the womb. Many women would be very jealous.

And that’s because we all attach a lot of importance to appearances – some TV celebrities and footballers are glamorised. Rightly or wrongly, we choose or rate friends by outward appearances. And I heard this week that even goats are attracted to happy faces.

But of course, our appearances can be misleading. In 1 Peter 3.3f, women are told *Your beauty should not come from outward adornment ... Rather, it*

*should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight.*

Christians have always been slow to take this on board. People are judged by outward, formal criteria rather than by what they really are. The lesson of Jesus mingling with the “unclean” tax collectors and sinners (Mk 2.13-17) still needs to be learned.

Only God knows you and me inside out, as it were: *“the Lord looks at the heart”* (1 Sam. 16.7).

Today's Gospel passage may seem rather strange. It shows Jesus' reaction to contemporary Judaism, with its emphasis on ritual and appearance, just what we have been talking about.

The idea of defilement (expressed in meticulous handwashing or lack of it) was a live issue for the earliest Jewish Christians. The Jews considered the written Law absolutely binding – e.g. priests washed their hands before offering sacrifice.

Then over the years a huge amount of oral Law grew up round the written Law – e.g. ordinary folk washed their hands before meals, not as matter of hygiene but to remove any contact with sinners or sinful objects (vv. 3-4).

The Pharisees and Scribes were viewed with awe by ordinary Jews because they kept all the laws they thought important in elaborate and time-consuming ways.

Now the Pharisees had noticed that Jesus' disciples were rather lax about the demands of the Law, especially some of the dietary and hygiene regulations. The clear implication was that Jesus should be doing something about this, bringing his disciples up to scratch as it were.

When challenged, Jesus showed Himself clearly against oral tradition, wanting his friends to realise there was much more to truly living for God than keeping all these man-made laws.

Jesus' criticisms of Judaism seemed very radical, but they were not anti-Semitic. His objections were normally specific rather than general (e.g. when he rejected laws against working on the Sabbath when human needs or animal welfare were at stake).

Jesus attacked the whole scribal approach to keeping the Law, saying that it is not the external things (like food, illness, or lack of correct ritual) that defile us, but what is already there inside and then comes out.

He quoted Isaiah 29.13:

*These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules (Mk 7.6-7).*

In other words, they put human rules in place of God's will. That's not real worship. It's hypocrisy!

The second part of the Gospel reading (vv. 14-15,21-23) shows Jesus with a new audience. He wanted his followers to have pure hearts, saying: *"Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them"* (Mk 7.15).

The Jewish Christians were slow to understand when Jesus *declared all foods 'clean'* (v.19, not in our reading). A person's acceptableness with God rests on the state of their heart, not what they eat.

That means avoiding the "dangerous dozen" sins – just LOOK AT THE LIST (vv. 21f; p.1010) .... The specific actions of sexual immorality, theft, murder and adultery are the products of failures in the heart as Matthew 5.21-30 reminds us. If we were part of a "free from" range, could any of us be branded as "free from" avarice or envy or pride or folly? Many of these are wrong attitudes rather than wrong actions, but Jesus was clear: *All these evils come from the inside and defile a person (v.23).*

Mark Twain said:

*"Part of the secret of success in life is to eat what we like and let the food fight it out inside".*

I'd like to paraphrase like this *"Part of the secret of success in the Christian life is to eat what we like and let the Holy Spirit fight it out for us inside"*. So we must let the Holy Spirit fight it out for us among the warring factions within us - the nine-fold fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5.22f), the twelve evils (Mk 7.21f) and the positive qualities listed in James Chapter 1. But how well do we match up with the exhortation *be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry?* (1.19).

Occasionally we see mounted police in action. A police horse in the middle of a riot is not weak. With one strike of its hoof it could maim or kill, but it doesn't because it's strength is under the control of its rider.

Similarly, we need to be aware of things that affect our attitudes and actions, things that can make us less than the people we are capable of being, and allow them all to be under God's control.

Yes, our Gospel today really does go to the "heart" of the matter. Our faith should dominate everything we think or do. We have to be the kind of people who are careful to consider the needs of the world and the unhappiness of others and to do something about it. Perhaps a certain American President could bear this in mind, instead of worsening the plight of people in Palestine.

If God really is ruling our lives, then *Every good and generous action comes from above, from the Father who created the lights of heaven* (James 1.17)

There's no text on this pulpit, but I know of one pulpit with these words from the Letter of James (1.22) inscribed in the oak panels:  
*'Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only'.*

In today's Gospel Jesus accused the Pharisees of being hearers and not doers. But these words are just as relevant today, to everyone, including preachers.

It is so easy to be a hearer and not a doer. Being human we are always in danger of honouring God with our lips but not with our hearts. The last verse of James 1 is a challenge to a practical faith, expressed in service to others:

*Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and keep oneself from being polluted by the world. (v.27).*

A very different “pure and faultless” religion from that practised by the Scribes and Pharisees!

Our New Testament readings have concentrated on what might be called the mechanics of living a caring life inspired by faith, where the love of God and neighbour will grow to the benefit of God’s kingdom.

But a truly Christian life is not just about our hard work or our heartfelt prayers. It should also be a life of joy and thankfulness, a theme picked up in an Old Testament reading for today from the Song of Solomon (2.8-13).

This is a book shot through with delight. It delights in the joys of sexuality and promotes a general attitude of joy and celebration. It rejoices that the flowers appear in the countryside, the green figs ripen on the fig trees and the vine blossoms give forth their fragrance.

Our lives, whatever their problems and difficulties, must be lives of celebration and joy. We should be sensitive to all the good and beauty around us and cultivate an attitude of thankfulness to God!

I thank God for our granddaughter’s beautiful finger nails but am mindful of the fact that nails and fingers can be used positively and creatively in all sorts of ways, but also negatively and destructively, just like anything that proceeds out of a human being.

My prayer for her and for us all is the Holy Spirit dominates our hearts and all that comes out of them, that from divine strength may come forth LOVE, JOY, PEACE, PATIENCE, KINDNESS, GOODNESS, FAITHFULNESS, GENTLENESS AND SELF CONTROL.

Only if the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5.22f) are in control will be worthy of the only unchanging branding, one that sticks around many times longer than even the Lyle’s Golden Syrup tin, that of a CHRISTIAN.