

Mark 7

One of the most important questions that we have to ask ourselves as a church is why are we here? Why has God arranged it so that there is a church here in Ballyclare?

Are we here as keepers of a set of traditions? Are we here to preserve a certain Protestant and British presence here on the island of Ireland? Are we here purely to meet together every Sunday? A kind of social gathering for the religiously minded good people of Ballyclare. Why, as a congregation and as a church, are we here?

That question is important for a number of different reasons; not the least of which is that a church that does not have a direction can be like a ship without a rudder. Blown about by every wind of fashion, tradition or controversy. Different people will answer that question in different ways according to what their hearts tell them.

What way do you answer it?

The Traditional Quiz

The word Pharisee is a word that today has really only a negative meaning. If you called someone a Pharisee these days you would definitely not be paying him or her a compliment but in the first century it was really quite different. The people of Israel saw the Pharisees as being the saviours of first century Judaism. Over the preceding two centuries under Greek and later Roman domination the religion and culture of the Jewish people had been continually under threat from outside forces.

The Pharisees were a group of men who stood up for the culture and traditions of Israel against those of the foreigners who lived in and dominated their land. They were men of the Bible, they had a thorough knowledge of the scriptures and they were also men of meticulous adherence to the letter of God's laws, as they understood them in scripture. The Apostle Paul demonstrates this in his letter to the Philippians when he says, "Philippians 3:4-6 If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee."

People looked up to the Pharisees because of both their legalistic righteousness and their upholding of Jewish culture and customs. In an era in which precious little must have been certain in life you could depend on the Pharisees and their strict adherence to tradition. In their zeal for the law of God the Pharisees had built up around it an oral tradition of rules and regulations that mapped out every detail of the Law's application.

These detailed regulations were designed to create what was known as a fence around the law. So that you might not break the law there were other, often more strict commands and traditions built around it so that if you inadvertently broke one of these at least you were not breaking God's law. With this outward passion for God's Law it seems strange then doesn't it that of all the groups of people that Jesus came in to contact with mentioned in the Gospels, the one with whom he seems to have had the most conflict with was the Pharisees.

All sorts of types of people come into contact with Jesus in the Gospels, adulterers, thieves, revolutionaries, traitors, swindlers, prostitutes and just about every kind of unsavoury character that you can think of but the one group of people for who Jesus reserves his harshest words are none of the groups mentioned above but rather his harshest words are reserved for these Pharisees.

Why is that? Why is it that it is the religious people who feel the sharp lash of Jesus tongue, over and over again in the Gospels? Why not the bad people or the sinful people? Mark chapter seven illustrates for us just why this is so. The setting of this chapter is that with the popularity of Jesus increasing some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law come out from Jerusalem to see just what is going on. They have come really to suss Jesus out and find out if he fits in with their ways of thinking and their ways of doing things.

The paragraph that we read at the end of chapter six illustrates just what kind of scene they found when they arrived. Jesus has been going around healing people, making them clean on the inside and whole on the outside. Try to imagine yourself as one of these religious inspectors sent up from Jerusalem, what is the first thing that you notice in the midst of this mêlée of healings and personal transformations?

Is it the blind being able to see again that catches your eye? Is it the fact that you can barely walk about the place for lame people on stretchers waiting to see Jesus to be made well? Is it the fact that you can hardly hear yourself think, for formerly deaf people shouting out God's praises at having the audio switched back on in their world? What would be the first thing that you would notice? What would be the first thing that you would run up to Jesus about and say wow, how are you doing all this?

Well, for these Pharisees the first thing that they notice in the midst of all of this is that Jesus disciples aren't washing their hands properly before meals! As Ron Weasley would put it, "They really need to sort out their priorities!" Talk about completely missing the point of what was going on here. These were men who knew their bible, what should have sprung instantly to mind was Isaiah's prophecy that

Isaiah 35: Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. 6 Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. 7 The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow. 8 And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that Way; wicked fools will not go about on it. 9 No lion will be there, nor will any ferocious beast get up on it; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, 10 and the ransomed of the LORD will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

As you can see the word unclean features in this prophecy of the messiah, this might well have been the kind of text that the Pharisees themselves would have used to lambaste the likes of Jesus and his disciples for not following their rules and traditions but Jesus is quick to point out to them that the kind of cleanliness that he is here to bring is not some kind of outward ritual cleanliness but the cleanness of heart and soul that only God in his mercy can bring.

Jesus is about the business of making people clean and acceptable before God. The Pharisees, although they claim to be about the exact same business are actually in the end trying to make themselves look acceptable in the eyes of each other and the eyes of the people. Their rules and regulations, although originally designed to help people be more faithful to God's laws have, in the end, formed a barrier between people and God.

In the case of the Pharisees their traditions had become an idol. Rather than pointing people to God they distracted people from God. It is frightening just how easily something can make the transition from being a useful aid in our worship to being an idol. It is shocking how short a time something has to be in a church, or any institution for that matter before it becomes an unchangeable tradition. And it is shocking how easy it is for a tradition to become more important than people.

Let me illustrate this with a personal story. When I became a Christian in my teenage years the church I initially went to was called Glenabbey. Some of you will know it; they used to meet in the old Orange Hall in Carnmoney. It was a very informal and really very welcoming church at that time and I really quite enjoyed it but I was encouraged by my family and my local minister to rejoin the church that I went to as a child, which was Abbey Presbyterian in Monkstown.

Now having been to an informal church, I had completely forgotten that young Presbyterians got all suited up to go to church. So I turned up to Abbey Presbyterian Church one Sunday morning dressed not too differently from many of you here in jeans and a tee shirt and my denim jacket. Some of the comments that I got from some of the older ladies at the front of the church are almost unrepeatable but the gist of which was that I was a disgrace both to myself and my family for turning up to church dressed as I was.

The fact that this was my first time there after six years meant nothing to them, the fact that I had recently committed my life to the Lord also seemed to mean nothing to them; what did matter was that I was not wearing a shirt and tie. Their message to me was clear and plain, they would rather not have had me there than have me there dressed differently from how they supposed I should be dressed in church.

Now had they bothered to look up what the Bible states about dressing for church they would have found that the only guidance given is not to dress up or look down on someone for how they were dressed. But the Bible did not feature in any of this, the only thing that mattered was that both me and children of my generation were not sticking to their man made traditions and so we should not have been in what they perceived to be their church.

Like the Pharisees before them these ladies had placed their traditions above the word of God and above the people of God, I'm sure they were responsible for driving out quite a few people of my own generation from that church. I guess I was too pig-headed or stubborn to take the vicious things that they had to say seriously enough but many people weren't and so they left to find churches where they would be made welcome or, tragically, some of them simply left and have never gone back to church since.

Jesus confronted the Pharisees with the danger of their hypocrisy, you see, you can get all of the traditions right and still be miles away from God. We could meet here every week carrying out a fossilised version of what our service was like 40 years ago but still it would never guarantee that our hearts would be right before God. God sees inside. God knows if we are simply going through the motions. **START STRIPPING** We might be able to put on an appearance of respectability and holiness on a Sunday but if the weekday person underneath has not changed then it is no different from the hypocrisy of the Pharisees.

Beware the dangers of traditionalism. For traditionalism breeds a fixation with outward appearances and can lead to us ignoring that inner transformation that Jesus has come to bring to all of us.

So, back to our question from earlier, why are we here?

The Bible tells us that we are here as a church purely and simply to point people to Jesus and to encourage one another to grow as his disciples. Let me challenge you with this question as I finish. The traditions that we have as a church and a congregation here in this place, well loved and cherished as they are, beautiful and rich in symbolism though they might be, are there any that, like those of the Pharisees, have come to stand in the way of our central mission as a church?

If so, what are we prepared to do about it?