

Year B Proper 22 Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

I'm sure you've heard the saying, "You can't see the forest for the trees". Well, the scribes and the Pharisees had gone way beyond this – they were so busy examining every little leaf, they didn't even know they were looking at a tree.

The scribes and the Pharisees – they were the people trained to know every little detail of the Law and they were the people who dedicated their lives to following every little detail of the Law.

They were getting worried – this Jesus person was breaking the rules but he was attracting a large following. He was healing people on the Sabbath but the people loved him. He fed and healed huge adoring crowds. The people were saying he walked on water. They were even starting to talk about him being the Messiah. This could mean big trouble for the establishment.

The scribes and the Pharisees were going to put an end to this nonsense. They were going to show the people that Jesus couldn't possibly be the Jewish Messiah when he wasn't even following the Jewish Laws.

So, they caught up with Jesus near Gennarsaret where he was healing the scores of sick people being brought to him in the marketplace. You can imagine the delight of the religious leaders when the first thing they saw was Jesus breaking the laws again. They seized their opportunity and they confronted him. "Aha," they said. "Why are you not following the teaching of our ancestors? Why are you not washing your hands before you eat?"

Now, the hand-washing they're talking about here had nothing to do with cleaning away germs. This hand-washing was a practice to provide ritual purification. There is no Old Testament law requiring ordinary folk to wash their hands before eating. Priests, only priests, were required to go through this ritual washing. So how did it become a "teaching of the ancestors" that everyone had to wash before meals?

This developed over a lot of years as faithful Jews – particularly the Pharisees – took the old, written laws and interpreted them to apply to their current,

everyday lives. This process created a very large spoken tradition of legal cases and teachings that they called the “teachings of the ancestors”.

A modern example would be that Orthodox Jews are forbidden to drive their vehicles on the Sabbath – even though cars weren’t even invented when the original law – to do no manner of work on the Sabbath – had been given to them by God.

Our part of Christ’s church has done this sort of thing too – young people being confirmed were expected to be able to recite the 10 Commandments, The Lord’s Prayer, and the Apostles’ Creed.

Nowhere in the New Testament does it say that baptism and confirmation are to be two separate events. Nowhere does it say we get baptized as babies and confirmed when we’re about 12, and nowhere does it say we have to have certain things memorized before that happens. There are loads of other teachings too – the number of candles in the Sanctuary, whether to stand or kneel, where to put the cross...all things that came into being after the New Testament was written.

These things develop over the years for practical reasons and to help us in our relationship with God. For the scribes and the Pharisees, their continuous development of more and more little rules was to help them live a life pleasing to God, to give glory to God, but for some of the scribes and Pharisees, this was actually leading them further away from God.

So when they confront Jesus about not washing his hands, Jesus turns the tables on them and says clean hands don’t mean you love God. He quotes Isaiah, telling them they honour God with their lips but their hearts aren’t in it. They worship God but they do it following their own human-made doctrines.

Jesus is telling them that they’re way too focused on the hundreds of little leaves – they’ve forgotten about the tree. They can have the cleanest hands in the world and still have a heart turned away from God.

Jesus then turns to the crowd – to us – and tells us not to make the same mistake these scribes and Pharisees did. We are human and we live in the world. It is

natural to let our worldliness creep into the things that we do as the church. It is so easy to fall in love with the rules we have written, with the prayers we've created, with the actions that accompanying them. They feel so comfortable that they begin to feel "right" and the way it must be in order to properly worship God. We take up inflexible stances on issues and begin to think we know God's word better than God does. Like the Pharisees, we can become so focused on the externals of faithfulness that we neglect our hearts – we can have incredibly clean hands and still have hearts turned away from God. Our efforts to live faithfully can put up walls instead of drawing us closer to God and neighbour – making a distinction between righteous and unrighteous, holy and not holy, welcome and not welcome, exclusive of certain people rather than inclusive. Humans over the years have torn apart Christ's body – the Church – as we take a stand on how we worship and who we worship with.

Jesus tells us to take off the zoom lens that narrowly focuses our vision and widen the shot to take in what God wants us to see and what Jesus came to proclaim. What we are meant to see, what Jesus proclaims is God's kingdom. Mark brilliantly points us to this in ways that perhaps escape conscious notice. The scribes and Pharisees are from Jerusalem he tells us. Mark's gospel is an urgent, unstoppable journey toward Jerusalem where Jesus will die. Jerusalem is the place where, through his death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus opens up the kingdom of God to all believers. He inaugurates the in-breaking of the kingdom by being the "first-fruits" of what the rest of us will eventually experience – new, imperishable life. Mark tells us that the scribes and Pharisees wash after being in the marketplace, wash everything they buy in the marketplace – ritually washing away the uncleanness. But, they have found Jesus today in the marketplace, healing the scores of sick people in the marketplace, showing to everyone around the healing, the wholeness, the compassion, the inclusivity of God's kingdom in the marketplace.

Jesus isn't telling the religious leaders, or the crowd, or us that we don't need to follow any rules – he says, "I have not come to get rid of the Law, but to fulfill the Law. By pointing out that we have created elements within our liturgies – like altar rails and cross-shaped carpeting – I am not saying we must throw out our

liturgies. We have beautiful liturgies – liturgies that transform us to be more like Christ even as we feel far from Christ. Our liturgy is where we experience the perfection of God’s kingdom, where we encounter our God who lifts us up into his kingdom and then sends us out to bear that kingdom to the world.

And this is Jesus’ lesson for his listeners in the gospel...God’s kingdom is the large, beautiful tree that lies before us, our guide for all we say and do rather than the little leaves of laws that can block our vision. The letter of James today puts this quite bluntly – we are to be doers of the word not simply hearers who deceive themselves. We are to act upon the word, he says, the implanted word that has the power to save our souls. God’s word – his laws, Jesus reminds us, is boiled down to one word...love – love of God, love of self, love of neighbour – the perfect love found in God’s kingdom.

Like the Pharisees, we will continue to interpret and develop God’s word as we learn and as our world changes. When the clamour of our human rules, opinions, wants, and needs threaten to drown out the still, small voice of God, Jesus reminds us to take off the zoom lens, widen our shot and see the tree of God’s kingdom and remember that every single one of the leaves on that tree bears the exact same word...Love.