

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

29.08.2021
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Introduction

Following a five-week stint in John's gospel, we are back to Mark now until the end of the lectionary year. Ordinary time progresses, and the gospel text selections move steadily through the seventh to the thirteenth chapters of Mark.

The six Markan chapters from which we'll read between now and the end of November are notable for their more sombre turn. The opening chapters of Mark had shown Jesus and the disciples receiving exceptional response — with corresponding deep comprehension — from the people. However, following this joyous initial reception, a turn happens, and in this turn, Jesus begins to be more challenging, asking people what they think of him. It is in these chapters that we'll dwell for the remainder of this lectionary cycle.

As you prepare to consider this text, it may be worthwhile taking a moment to quieten yourself to make space — in the heart — for the place where these gospel words will land.

Text

Mark 7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

"This people honours me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.'
You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

Comment

The libraries of books contained in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures are ambivalent about the heart. It is — as this text from Mark reminds us — the place from which evil intentions can come. However, elsewhere it is the meeting place with God; it is the place of prayer and encounter; it is the place of deceit. The heart is the site of competing energies in the human person, the broad witness of the scriptures seem to indicate, at times showing great goodness, at other times showing great capacity for duplicity. The heart might be the site of God’s dwelling, but it is also a site of conflict.

This text is the closest we’ll get in Mark to the Matthean passages where Jesus argues with his co-religionists about how to interpret the Law. Mark’s version is shorter, to the point, blunt, action-focused and almost impatient (much like Mark’s Jesus). This Jesus quotes from the prophet Isaiah saying that the heart is the place for discernment of true worship. Then he calls his followers close and speaks again of the heart “nothing outside a person... can defile... but the things that come out are what defile... For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come.”

What — besides the obviously biological — is the heart?

In the Hebrew understanding (and while the gospels were written in Greek, they are certainly trying to convey the Semitic approach of a Jewish man) the heart is not the place of emotion, but of resolution. It is the place of decision and prayer. It is the place of discernment. The heart is the place of the psyche, and the place of resolution. In short, the heart is the place of true desire, and from desire, human actions derive. Desire can be powerful: in its courage, magnanimity, deception, destruction and kindness. To be an adult is to have a connection with the conflicted experience of the heart.

Therefore, alongside these considerations of the heart is the question of “What do you want?” Ignatius of Loyola made this a central question to so much of his spiritual direction with his followers. He saw that desire will drive us, especially if we think it will not.

“What do you want?” can be a tremendously difficult question to answer. A person might *say* they want to resolve the conflict in their congregation, yet they *act* in a way that implies their deepest desire is to drag the conflict on for as long as possible. There are *stated aims*, but underneath these aims are the unstated and powerful *driving desires*; the words of Jesus in this week’s lectionary text seem to build on the distinction between what a person says they want and what they really want. It’s as much the realm of psychoanalysis as spirituality. Often a person has deceived even themselves: they say they want peace, but they continue to stoke strife; they say they want connection, yet they continue to withdraw; they say they want a decision, yet they continue to push a decision into the future.

This is the subtle form of deceit being highlighted by this week's lectionary text. It's easy to personify deceit as a villainous character, dressed in big-bad-wolf costume, stomping into the world, announcing its evil intent. What's more difficult is the confusing realm where you do not know what you want, where you do not know what the good is, and where you realise at the end of a period of time that you've been driven by envy and destruction rather than integrity and virtue.

We can be a stranger to what is happening in the place of the heart.

And what is Jesus' remedy for this?

It is to be aware; it is to be present to the practice of questioning; it is to go deep and dwell in this complicated place, and there to recognise the trends that might be driving you. It is to trust that your own heart should not always be trusted, and in a lifelong practice of turning with trust and questions to the place of the heart, to pray that it is courageous desires you'll follow more often than heartless ones.

Response

Our Quaker friends have so much right: silence. A response to this week's text is surely some silence, to let it sit, and work, and ask, and call.

Prayer

For years I've turned to the words from Augustine's confessions when it comes to the heart. For him, the heart is the place of encounter with God; a place he had distanced himself from. In fact, he has been "wandering outside of myself"... all the while God is waiting inside, in the heart, for encounter. Here are some words of prayer from Augustine's Confession. I've taken a few translations and amalgamated them:

Late, oh late have I loved you,
beauty ever ancient and ever new:
late have I loved you.

You were within me
but I was in the world outside myself.
I sought you there,
and in my unlovely state
I plunged into those lovely created things which you made.
You were within me,
and I was not with you.
Fair things kept me far from you,
though if they did not have their being in you,
they had no existence at all.

You called and cried out loud
You shattered my refusals.
You were radiant and resplendent,
you put to flight my empty paths.
You were fragrant,
and I drew in my breath
and now pant after you.

I tasted you,
and I feel but hunger and thirst for you.
You touched me,
and I am all fire to attain the peace
which comes from being with you.

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Inner Journey