

✘ May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart, be acceptable in your sight O God, my strength and my redeemer.

The Jews of Jesus time had strict rules and regulations concerning cleanliness. Such as, according to today's gospel: "Do not eat anything from the market unless you wash it". Good idea. And apparently, they also observed "the washing of cups, pots and kettles". Funny that, so do I... I observe the ritual stacking of the dishwasher on a regular basis.

We can see that the Jewish laws regarding cleanliness weren't silly. They knew full well that dirty things are able to make us sick. But Jesus phrases this as though he thinks these practises *were* silly or useless, competing with God's rule. But I'd like to think there is room in our lives at least for following God AND making sure our cups are clean.

Jesus of course, isn't drawing this comparison out of nowhere – the comparison between practical rules and the rules of God. He is answering his audience – if not their words, then their hearts.

"There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."

Obviously, eating unclean food from unclean pots with unclean hands can make you sick, and so you could say defile the body.

But when you see someone eating with unwashed hands and, rather than feeling concern that they might get sick, you take offense at them and judge them, then it is no longer about the body. It is about status, it is about social acceptability, it is about righteousness. It moves from a practical issue to becoming a moral issue. To eat without washing hands becomes an immoral act. One for which you won't just possibly be condemned by practical consequences, but for which you will definitely be condemned by social consequences, if not divine consequences.

There are a lot of pieces of perceived practical wisdom that human beings have learnt along the way, which get passed down through the generations. We can see it ourselves in a lot of our superstitions – don't walk under a ladder or you'll get bad luck – not to mention it is dangerous for both the person walking under the ladder as well as the one who is up it. Superstitions like that are like an old-world OH&S policy. No wonder people cared about following the traditional wisdom they had received. These traditions mean safety.

But even if these pearls of wisdom are sensible – washing food, washing your cups, hand washing (and we can add our own sensible rituals to this list: making sure shoe laces are tied up, wearing a hat in the sun, etc.) - as human beings, so often do we forget that the rules and regulations we create are there to serve us. We do not serve the rules. The rules are not to become an idol. So Jesus warns his listeners not to confuse these pieces of received practical advice, enshrined in tradition, with what is actually important to God.

And just what is important to God?

Jesus tells us: “It is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come.” The heart, Jesus says, is what’s important.

The ‘heart’ we hear.

And then we, a modern audience, immediately think of our emotional-centre. How I *feel* is what’s important. And this can easily lead us to the idea that, in order to please God, we have to make sure we are in line with positive feelings. Always happy, peaceful, and friendly. Which is very nice of course.

But the heart that Jesus speaks of is not the heart we know. For the Jews of Jesus’ time, the heart was the seat of rationality and the will - not the brain. When the heart was referred to, it had a lot more connotations that we now would associate with the word “mind”. While we tend to separate the heart and mind, the emotions from the reason, in Jesus’ context they were not separated at all.

But I believe that making the heart such a driving force, even with our modern sensibilities, actually makes a lot of sense. Where rationality is something that we would associate with the mind rather than the heart, the heart really has a much bigger influence on our decision-making than we give it credit for. That is to say, our reason and our rationalising is more often driven by desire and emotion, than it is by logic (even if we tell ourselves otherwise). You can see this in the way that people build and shift arguments in order to justify what they want. Just look around during election time, and ask yourself whether the heart is more important in garnering votes than the mind. I think you’ll find that most people vote with their heart, and that most politicians too, pursue policy based on emotions, more than logic.

The fact of the matter is that human beings are desire-driven. Our feelings, our thoughts, our decisions, and ultimately our actions, are all motivated by the orientation of our hearts.

And the orientation of our hearts is based on numerous things: our upbringing, what experiences we have had in life, how much we have felt loved, how much we have been hurt, what we have been taught, how much we dare to trust, and how cynical we have become.

Add to that the horrors of the world at large, brought into our homes on seemingly ever-growing technicolour screens, and we can find that our hearts long for certainty, for security, to feel special, loved and safe. We see on television, and perhaps more dangerously, read all over the internet, all the things that come out of people. And - my goodness - there is plenty of evidence there that, indeed, a lot that comes out of the human heart defiles.

Left to the trials and tribulations of the internet and the world news, our hearts too could easily become defiled, ending up filled with envy, and slander and folly. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says, "it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks." That is to say, you can listen to a person's heart by listening to their words. Just as road-rage fuelled obscenities reveal the state of the heart, so too did Jesus' words reveal the state of his heart.

And he prayed for mercy upon those who are about to kill him; And after rising from dead, having been murdered in a gruesome way, he doesn't come back with vengeance. Instead he declares: 'Peace be with you'.

However defiled the worlds we inhabit may have become, however awful and slanderous and prideful the news we read may be, and however vitriolic our social media feeds may have turned, we live in the knowledge that it is not what we consume that defiles us, it is not what we read or see that tarnishes us, it is only what comes out that defiles. So, I might suggest that perhaps the best thing that can come out of us is this prayer from Psalm 51: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."

Amen.