

Handwashing: Mark 7.1-23

A view from the Jerusalem Temple, looking down into the crowded streets.



So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, ‘Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with unwashed hands?’

Handwashing — oh yes, we all know about that! I don’t think my hands have ever been so clean. I wash them when I come in, and when I go out — when the shopping arrives, and when I pick up the paper — when I meet somebody new, and when I’ve just been out in the garden. I started out with all sorts of fancy hand-gels, but I’ve ended up just getting up a nice lather with good old-fashioned soap and water. My mother taught me to blow bubbles with nice lathery hands — which does vary the monotony, even if you end up a bit leathery.

Of course we can’t stop now — in fact I suspect it’ll get even more important as things start to open up again over the summer. But I wonder — will we ever get out of the habit, now that we’ve got into it? Or will we just become obsessive hand-washers, forgetting why we were doing it in the first place?

In today's reading from Mark, some scribes and Pharisees (the theological heavy mob) come down from Jerusalem to check out what's going on in Galilee, out in the sticks. Jesus' reputation is spreading far and wide, and they've come down to check his credentials. Their first step is to appraise the teacher by watching how his students behave. That's a sobering thought, especially if you're a teacher! If people are going to judge Jesus by how his disciples behave, what would they make of you and me?

On this occasion, they're not impressed: these rough-and-ready Galileans don't measure up to the polished standards of the top schools in Jerusalem. But the criticism doesn't seem to make sense. Surely the Pharisees were right? Washing your hands before eating sounds pretty sensible, and so does washing plates and cups before you use them. What's going on?

Actually I think there are at least two different conversations going on in this passage. Mark is having a conversation with the people who are going to read his story in the Roman world. These are "second Christians", people who had never met Jesus himself but just heard about him from his disciples (people like you and me, in other words). They knew that Jesus and his first disciples were Jews — that is, they looked to the Bible (the part we call the Old Testament) to guide their everyday decisions about how to live in a way that pleases God. They knew that Jews had certain rules about "purity" — particular foods and customs that made a distinction between clean and unclean (like not eating pork). And they needed to know, do those rules apply to us if we're not Jewish, or are they just for Jesus' Jewish followers?

You can see part of that conversation in verses 3-4, which are in brackets in my Bible (Mark might have used a footnote if he'd been writing a modern book). This is a bit that explains about the Jewish customs to people who aren't Jewish. The fact that Mark has to explain this suggests very strongly that most of his readers are Gentiles (otherwise they wouldn't need an explanation). And you can see it again in v.19 (in brackets

again): “Thus he declared all foods clean”. This isn’t what Jesus said. It makes most sense as a comment on Jesus’ teaching for “second Christians”, living in the great cities of the Empire and trying to work out how to follow Jesus in their world. (Maybe it’s not a coincidence that the next story in Mark’s Gospel takes Jesus into Gentile territory north of Galilee.) You can see this argument coming to the surface every now and then in Paul’s letters — in Romans 14, for example, or 1 Corinthians 8, or Acts ch.15.

But Jesus’ conversation with the Pharisees (which re-surfaces in all the Gospels) took a slightly different form. Of all the different sects and parties in first-century Judaism, the Pharisees were in many ways the closest to Jesus and his disciples. They took the Bible seriously as a revelation of God’s way of living. They seriously believed that God was calling his whole people (not just the priests) to live in a special way that revealed something about God’s way of life to the outside world. They took seriously the verse in Leviticus 19.2 that says, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” — or the verse in Exodus 19.6 that says, “You shall be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” They believed, like the prophet Isaiah, that God has called and rescued his people precisely for this purpose — to live in the world (God’s world) as “a light to the nations” (Isaiah 49.6), a little glimpse of the kingdom of heaven, “so that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth”.

And Jesus and his followers believed in these things too (look at 1 Peter 2.9 or Acts 13.47). Where they differed was how to interpret the Bible — which of God’s laws apply in different situations, which apply to everybody (like the Ten Commandments) and which apply to a particular people in a particular situation. It’s not that interpretation is wrong in itself — if you have a thousand-year old law code, you really need trained legal experts (the “scribes”) to work out how the underlying principles of the law apply in particular situations (the same is true in English law). But you need to be able to distinguish between the underlying principles and the particular application.

And that’s what Jesus is doing here — claiming that the rules about hand-washing were an unnecessary and illegitimate extension of the original laws, which simply weren’t

practical for a lot of hard-working people in messy occupations. This is part of what Mark means about Jesus “teaching with authority” — he was claiming the authority to offer his own interpretation, getting back to the basic principles and re-thinking how ordinary people — even Gentiles — could show something of God’s holiness and God’s kingdom in their working lives. (And starting a process that we’re still engaged with today!)

The real problem with the purity regulations, Jesus says (vv.14-23) is that they only touch the outside of a person, not the real inner core. No amount of hand-washing can make the heart clean or wash away the stain of sin. The prophets and poets of ancient Israel were perfectly aware of this. Look at Psalm 51, where the psalmist pleads with God for real, deep-down heart-cleansing (“truth in the inward parts”) — or Jeremiah 31.31-34, where the prophet looks for a new covenant with God: “I will put my law within them, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people”.

The question is, How? Effectively in this passage, Jesus is raising a question but not giving us the answer — yet. As Tom Wright puts it, Mark is telling us, *Jesus is offering a cure for the problems of the heart*. “But ... what does that mean? As Mark allows this question to surface in our minds, he also tells us: read on, and you’ll find out. ... Behind this is the strong sense ... that what happened in Jesus brought the whole scriptures, the old covenant with Israel, to a new fulfilment. The scriptures spoke of purity, and set up codes as signposts to it; Jesus was offering the reality. When you arrive at the destination you don’t need the signposts any more, not because they were worthless but precisely because they were correct” (Tom Wright, *Mark for Everyone* [SPCK 2001], 92-93). Now read on!

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

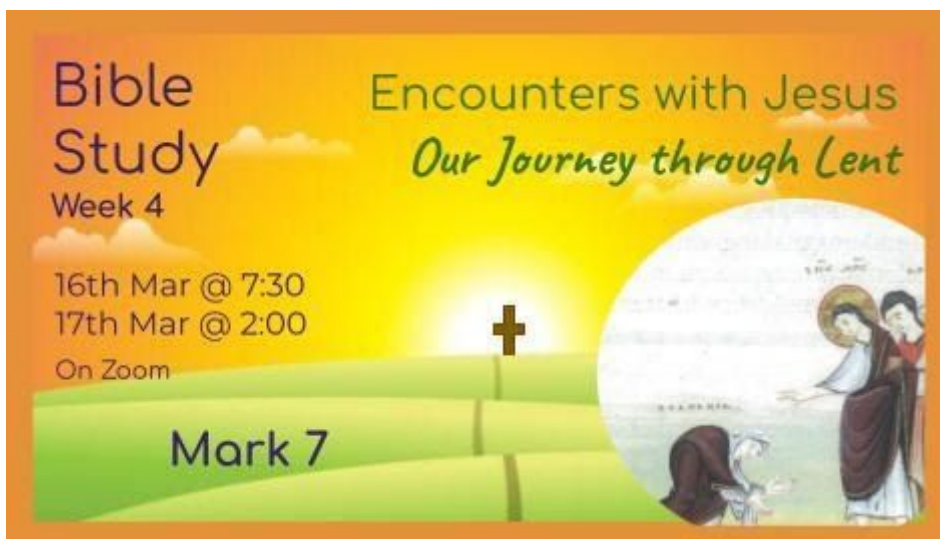
Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your holy Spirit from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain me with your bountiful spirit.

Psalm 51.10-12

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Don't forget you can join us for the Lent Study sessions on Tuesday or Wednesday to explore these encounters in more depth!



Bible Study
Week 4

16th Mar @ 7:30
17th Mar @ 2:00
On Zoom

Mark 7

Encounters with Jesus
Our Journey through Lent

The poster features a bright yellow sun over a green landscape with a cross on a hill. A circular inset shows a religious scene with figures, including one kneeling in prayer.