

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to your Lord our strength and Redeemer

In churches up and down the land, indeed across the world there are long held 'traditional' ways of doing things those traditions may go back generations or they may go back just a couple of years and be in the process of becoming traditions. I remember going into churches to take services and when asking how do you do things here and being told in various ways 'Oh we do things traditionally here.' What I actually found in every case were little idiosyncrasies that I had never come across before. And in each case they were very proud of keeping up what they saw as the traditions and the proper way of doing things and even in churches where they knew they were not doing the same as the church down the road they had a ready answer about either churchmanship and differences because of that or the church down the road had veered of course and was doing it wrong.

Now that might sound like a caricature of church life and in a way it is but it is based on truth and I have often been rather surprised at what has been considered normal and traditional and proper. Not that any of what I came across was bad or wrong just different and yet the people doing it were convinced that it was the norm. There are some traditions of course that are very widely held and there are church rules and canon law. Without such things not just in the church but in society in general there would be anarchy.

We need to have laws and a judicial system and we need to have traditions to help us find our way through life, they help us to know what is what and how we fit in to the world. Traditions are often how we learn who we are and our place in society.

Sometimes though traditions need to be challenged. When I was at school it was tradition in my school for the boys to get the cane across their backside if they were naughty and for girls a ruler across the back of their hand and if you told your mum you had been punished you might well get a smack from her. These days if you told your mum the teacher hit you, she would, rightly in my opinion, soon be lodging a complaint against the teacher. There are many other traditions that have been changed for example slavery is not longer acceptable, though it is still happening, and women can be priests in many church, though not all and men can be full time homemakers which would have been seen as very odd when I was little.

There are many traditions which have changed over time but one thing has not and that is that traditions are for a purpose they are not just ideas pulled out of the air, but ways of helping people to belong to a group or to ensure continuity in a group and to ensure the groups primary purpose is fulfilled.

And here we get to the crux of the matter. In the church all the traditions we have are to ensure we fulfil our primary purpose of worshipping God.

In the Gospel reading we had today we find Jesus embroiled in a challenge to the traditions of his own Jewish faith. There is already conflict between the leaders of the faith and Jesus and his followers, those in authority are looking for ways to discredit him and one way is to show he breaks traditions, breaks the rules.

Had we heard the first verses of chapter 15 we would be aware a challenge had been issued by the Pharisees asking why Jesus disciples don't always follow the correct rules for hand washing before eating, Jesus reply is not give an explanation but to point out that many of them break rules to help them keep hold of wealth which they should have been using if to support elderly parents. Thus breaking the command to honour their parents.

Then he speaks to the disciples about how it is not food going into the mouth that matters that is simply food that will go in and through the body in the usual way it is what comes out of the mouth that matters it is words that come from the heart that matter, words that will honour God not misuse God's ways or twist Gods rules and their own traditions for personal gain.

Then we get to today's reading and Jesus faces a further challenge this time not from those in authority but from someone he, as a Jew, and a man, would not usually mix with. He and the Disciples had left their own country and gone north to what is now Lebanon where although there were a lot of Jews living they were a minority group.

We can piece together the scene from the reading, he was perhaps sitting at a table in a courtyard and having eaten is ready to talk to the crowd who have gathered round to hear what this visitor who many have already heard about has to say. The crowd might well have been a mix of cultures and faiths some listeners Jewish and some Gentiles. Then a Gentile woman rushes up and begs for help for her daughter, the disciples offer to send her away and Jesus says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

He is the messiah the Jews had been waiting for the one they traditionally spoke of as God's promise to them.

But the woman doesn't go away, she a Gentile breaks all tradition and kneeling calls him Lord saying "Lord, help me!"

His reply seems rather cruel he “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” But her reply “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” must have affected him and he says

“Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” her daughter healed.

We can’t know his motive for insulting her, maybe he was following a deeply learned tradition of insulting her people or maybe it was a deliberate ploy to test her faith, or may it was to see how his disciples would react. Whatever his reason I am left wondering had he always known he was not just for one particular people or was this the moment when he realised he had to break with the traditional view and role of the Messiah and become the Saviour of the whole world.

Whatever the truth it is I think a good lesson for churches to take on board. A lesson about hospitality and a chance to ask ourselves how well our traditions speak not just to the insider but to the outsiders.

Does what we do attract people to God or put them off, would a stranger in our midst find our services welcoming or so hard to follow it puts them off coming back?

Do any of our traditions distract us from our primary purpose of worshipping God and bringing others to faith?

We need to be very aware of the effect our traditions our ‘funny little ways’ have and to ensure that what we do is attractive to those who are not yet members of the church and accommodates the needs of those who are just testing the waters of faith and we need to listen carefully to them just as Jesus listened to the woman in the reading, the women who had the insight to recognise him as Lord before many of his own people.

The hospitality Jesus showed the women was radical, it went against all the traditions he would have been brought up with and with all the behaviours he would be expected to show towards both non Jewish people and to women.

Are we radical enough to ensure that the church today is truly a place of hospitality a place of welcome for all who seek God.

I hope so for I think we will be judged not by how well we kept our traditions which are in the end are fallible human constructs but by how well we met our primary purpose of worshipping God and serving his kingdom. Amen

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ

Glory to you O Lord

[¹⁰ Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen and understand. ¹¹ What goes into someone’s mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them.”¹² Then the disciples came to him and asked, “Do you

know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?”¹³ He replied, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots.¹⁴ Leave them; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.”

¹⁵ Peter said, “Explain the parable to us.”¹⁶ “Are you still so dull?” Jesus asked them. ¹⁷ “Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? ¹⁸ But the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them.”]

²¹ Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²² A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.”

²³ Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.”

²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”

²⁵ The woman came and knelt before him. “Lord, help me!” she said.

²⁶ He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”

²⁷ “Yes it is, Lord,” she said. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

²⁸ Then Jesus said to her, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed at that moment.

This is the Gospel of the Lord

Praise be to thee O Christ