

Proper 15, Year A, 2023: 20 August 2023

Isaiah 56. 1, 6-8; Psalm 67; Romans 11.1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15. (10-20), 21-28

The Heart of the Matter

This morning I want to tackle the most disturbing aspect of today's readings that affects each one of us. What might this be? I suggest it concerns the locus, the place where human defilement originates. To defile is to spoil, mar, damage. In today's gospel Jesus sets the scene by calling the crowd to him and saying: 'It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles'. A little later Jesus determines the place where human defilement originates namely in our hearts. We know that the heart is often used to describe the centre of our very being. It is therefore disturbing to discover that the place of our defilement is the heart, the locus of our very being. Jesus says, out of the heart come 'evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.' The locus of the origin of our love, the heart, is also the place where our defilement originates. It follows we must give attention to our hearts. This is obvious when it comes to our heart as a living organ, but for many much less so when it is about our spiritual heart. A consequence of the above is that we should allot as much time, energy and care to our spiritual hearts, as we do to our hearts as a vital organ for life. An image that Paul, the Apostle uses is of the athlete who trains to compete in the race by exercising self-control in all things. (1 Corinthians 9:24-27)

There is a strong biblical tradition that stretches back to at least the Psalms, the prophet Ezekiel and others. Ezekiel proclaims on behalf of the Lord God, 'And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you.' (Ezekiel 36:25-27) Our response might be, 'Lord, give us this heart always!' And the psalmist pleads, 'Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.' (Ps. 51:10-12) In other words, putting it bluntly, we require heart surgery. Sounds serious doesn't it? And it is.

In each there is a struggle going on to a greater or lesser extent. It is what one commentator called 'performance disconnect', which most of us in holy orders are especially prone to. What is meant by the phrase 'performance disconnect'? It is the gap that opens up between what we say we believe and how we live our lives. We preach one thing and do something that shows up the performance disconnect. How

do I get from here to there? It is what Paul, the Apostle, writing about himself articulates for all, 'I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.' (Romans 7:15) The way forward is always first to acknowledge the reality of the ongoing struggle in us, in our heart, as Paul does and to see clearly to what extent our actions, our thoughts, our lives are affected by it. It is the way of humility. It is the way of not thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought. To be ready and willing to be brought down a notch, when we have erred from the way like lost sheep. A verse from the Book of Proverbs makes an important point, 'He that refuseth instruction despiseth his own soul: But he that heareth reproof getteth understanding.' (KJV, Proverbs 15:32) But in us we may experience 'reluctant willingness' to allow ourselves to be shaped by God through the working of the Holy Spirit. We may resist instruction. And who welcomes being reproofed for their actions?

Jesus teaches that before all else we need to take responsibility for our thoughts, our words and the actions that defile, that proceed from within, from the heart. In one case Jesus even speaks of straying eyes. 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery in their heart.' (Mt 5:27-28) There will be circumstances that can explain our actions, our sin, but we should not seek to hide behind them, but rather own up to them, to take full responsibility for them and mend our ways. Since at least the 1552 Book of Common Prayer (BCP), at Morning Prayer the minister invites those present to make their confession, while understanding that he or she, the clergy, is included. It is said in another context, that of preaching, that ministers as preachers are always preaching to themselves.

Hear the part of the invitation to confession of our sins relevant for today. "Dearly beloved brethren, the Scripture moveth us, in sundry places, to acknowledge and confess our manifold sins and wickedness; and that we should not dissemble nor cloak them before the face of Almighty God our heavenly Father..." This extract makes it clear that it is Scripture (God's written word) in sundry (meaning various) places that moves us to be serious about our sins. The invitation warns, neither to dissemble (disguise) nor to cloak (hide) them, but rather to see them clearly for what they are. Their seriousness is not to be diminished by making them smaller or less ugly than they are (Verniedlichung), but by seeing them for what they are, stumbling blocks and heavy logs. Name them. Furthermore it is clear before whom we making our

confession. It is the Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who alone in eternity loves us with a perfect love, so that we can continue to make steps free of fear in the way that leads to the fullness of life. This is a lifelong task of the Christian as he/she runs the race that is set before them.

How often have we heard how someone had this or that ailment and failed to make an appointment to see a doctor until it was too late? Many of us will know well that there are aspects in our lives we need to address. How can we move from knowing our need to addressing it? Can we make a start today? Can we move from here to there? So we ask to what extent are we given to 'evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander'. Each of these failings originating in the heart are clear enough in their meaning at face value, but each also needs elaboration. What I call spending time with. Take from the list murder as an example. Murder can include a person's reputation. A murder is committed against a person's reputation when false accusations are made. Have we played a part in murdering a person's reputation. We call this character assassination. Theft may not only be theft of things, but will include intellectual property and plagiarism. Today it will include identity theft. A real threat. Concerning evil intentions I want to share this with just one example. Some love money so much that they are willing to prey on the savings of elderly couples and persons who they meet with trust, only to discover that their trust has been misplaced. The seven words listed here are specific, but they have a wider application, as I hope I have been able to indicate a little by the above.

In our lectionary (the readings set for today) the first ten verses of today's Gospel are optional, but this year and today we choose to include them. It is easier to step away from that which makes us feel uncomfortable and weighs on the heart, than try and articulate it. It isn't a particularly happy undertaking, is it. A common accusation is all the church ever talks about is sin. Really? Is anyone listening? The church, also talks about a way forward, a way that leads to a fuller life, a remedy. A new life and a new heart! Listening to Viktor Frankl's classic, *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946), one realises again just how forlorn people are without meaning. Frankl will write, "Life is never made unbearable by circumstances, but only by lack of meaning and purpose."

In 1969 Eric Clapton released a song he composed while a member of the rock group Blind Faith. He wrote and Steve Winwood. Clapton sang,

I have finally found a way to live
Just like I never could before.
I know that I don't have much to give, ...

I have finally found a way to live
In the colour of the Lord.

I have finally found a place to live
In the presence of the Lord.

I have finally found a way to live
In the colour of the Lord.

Asked about the song known as 'In the Presence of the Lord' Clapton said that it was a song of gratitude. The message is to say thank you for whatever happens... Clapton will lose his son who dies after falling out of a window 53 storeys high in NYC. He will write the song, 'Tears in heaven' (released in 1991).

Beyond the door
There's peace, I'm sure
And I know there'll be no more
Tears in heaven

Our faith, the Christian faith, gives both meaning and direction, while not only speaking of love, joy and peace, but also showering us with the gifts of love, joy and peace in rich measure. It calls us 'to maintain justice, and do what is right, for salvation will come'; as heard in the Isaiah reading. We are being held to the highest standards at all times. But slippage there is. There is performance disconnect. Is it not the case that one of today's ailments today is that we fail to take sin seriously enough? It is by acknowledging the reality of our sin that we come to know just how estranged we are from God, who comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ that we may be drawn to him and in Christ be given a new heart.

We began by addressing a disturbing aspect that affects each one of us namely the sin 'which clings so closely'. (Hebrews 12:1) The other readings in different ways all point in the same direction. We read in Isaiah: I, God, 'will gather others to them, besides them already gathered.' (Is. 56.8b) As sin is a condition, an ailment that affects all, God

in Jesus comes for all. He does not only come for the people of Israel, neither does he reject them. He also comes for the Canaanite women, often referred to as the Syro-Phoenician woman. She comes to Jesus in great need. And through persistence and a portion of witticism is rewarded. Jesus acknowledges that her faith is great. Faith is found outside Israel. Elsewhere Jesus says of a Roman centurion, not a child of Israel, whose need is also great, 'When Jesus heard the centurion, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, 'Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith.' (Mt. 8-1-10) Faith is found in Israel. Faith is found outside of Israel. Salvation is for all. Those who have strayed will be found. The reality of sin comes to affect all, but God in Jesus comes that all may learn to come willingly and joyfully in peace to his table and be fed by Him in faith who said of himself, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.' To which we reply in the words of the disciples, 'Sir, give us this bread always' so that our hearts may be full of love for you and for all the people you have given and entrusted to us. Take from us all that separates us from you that we may dwell in your house and walk in your ways all the days of our life. **Amen.**