This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me

Mark 7:1  Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, 2 they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. 3 For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 4 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. 5 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?” 6 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; 7 in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

8 You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

9 Then he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! 10 For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ 11 But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban’ (that is, an offering to God) — 12 then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother. 13 Thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.”

14 Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: 15 there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

17 When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable.

18 He said to them, “Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, 19 since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) 20 And he said, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles.

21 For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, 22 adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. 23 All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

With this Gospel reading, we are back on the Markan readings and the change may come as something of a shock, with its directness and even earthiness. The verses omitted by the lectionary are restored in italics, as they help towards a fuller understanding of the passage as a whole.

As we read the passage, it may be good to recall that all religions have evolved “traditions” which can be at variance with the core vision of the faith. It is true of Islam, Judaism and, within Christianity, of all the churches. The passage is an invitation not to past accusation but to present self-examination.

KIND OF WRITING

The text is a series of arguments, offering a thesis and proofs in a sequence. The chart overleaf traces the sequence, which is structured according to the principles of “anecdote” (chreia) rhetoric (persuasion).

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The food laws were, and are, a vital part of Jewish identity. In general, scholars would reckon that the dietary laws came in at a time when assimilation was a great threat. This could have happened at many times in Israelite history, but perhaps the greatest danger of assimilation / annihilation was at the time of the Exile in Babylon (587-539 BC). It is probable that the identity markers of Judaism came into being then: the dietary (kosher) laws, Sabbath observance and, perhaps, circumcision after birth.

It may be added that such protection has shown its value over two and half millennia. At the time of Jesus, there was in some quarters a tendency to casuistry, to nit-picking regulations to test the practi-
New Testament Foreground

The extent to which the early Christian movement ought to have held onto earlier traditions was a problem from the start, arising first of all in Paul’s letters. His understanding of the cross led him to think that God now included all humanity in his plan of salvation and that to remain distinctive by outward signs (the identity marks of Judaism) no longer served the kingdom of God.

St Paul

Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. So do not let your good be spoken of as evil.

For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval. Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God.

Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat; it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble. The faith of one who has no reason to condemn the way of another. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. So do not let your good be spoken of as evil.

Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve. But those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because they do not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. (Rom 14:13-23)

Brief Commentary

Verse 1 Pharisees, in particular, were concerned with the details of the Law. In some way, their approach was liberal and “lay”, taking the sacredness out of the Temple and making it a reality in daily life. It could lead to scrupulosity (OCD).

Verse 2 Ritual washing was essential before eating.

Verses 3-4 The explanatory note here tells us that Mark is writing for an audience with reduced direct experience of Judaism, hence the need for clarification.

Verse 5 The tradition of the elders meant rules not found in the Bible but developed over time by the community. The Pharisees, in particular, laid great store by this unwritten, oral tradition, which they traced back to Moses.

Verse 6 Argument from Scripture would have been very powerful for the Pharisees. The prophets regularly condemned the religion of mere outward observance. Cf. ‘Spur me the din of your chanting, let me hear none of your strumming on lyres, let justice flow like water, and uprightness like a never-failing stream!’ (Amos 5:23-24, NJB) Notice the bodily imagery here—to be developed later.

Verse 7 Always a risk in all religions and not unknown in our own (ahem!).

Verse 8 A very stark first conclusion, not lacking in clarity. The verses which follow illustrate this with the example of Corban, which allowed people, evidently, to get around their filial duty to their parents.

Verse 14 This is a formal address, calling for special attention.

Verse 15 Here is the principle behind the example and teaching which follow. In the omitted vv. 17-20, a fairly graphic illustration is made, which comprehensively undermines the concern with food laws. It is not all that clear that Jesus himself would have been so absolute—otherwise, why was there so much trouble with the issue in early Christianity?

Verses 21-22 This teaching is, of course, consistent with Jesus’ move to the heart as expressed in the Sermon on the Mount, especially in the Antitheses (Matthew 5:21-48).

Argument

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<tr>
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Verse 23 Jesus is therefore not denying that there can be defilement—it’s just that it comes from within, not from without.

Prayer

Father of light, giver of every good and perfect gift, bring to fruition the word of truth sown in our hearts by your Son, that we may rightly understand your commandments, live your law of love, and so offer you worship that is pure and undefiled. Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.
Every perfect gift is from above, from the Father of lights

Jas 1:17 Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

Jas 1:21 Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word (emphysis logos) that has the power to save your souls.

Jas 1:22 But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.

Jas 1:27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

In the lectionary Year B, James is read continuously from Sunday 22B to Sunday 26B. Accordingly, a more ample introduction will be provided today, without the need to repeat it on subsequent Sundays. The document was effectively dismissed by Luther as “a right without the need to repeat it on subsequent Sundays. The whole document as such is quite continuous from Sunday 22B to Sunday 26B. Accordingly, a more ample introduction will be provided today, without the need to repeat it on subsequent Sundays.

The letter is addressed to the Diaspora. This allegorical usage must point to Jewish followers of Jesus dispersed throughout the known world. One may always ask which James and when. Of the five James in the NT, only two are real candidates. James the brother of John was executed by Herod Agrippa I in AD 44. James the brother of Jesus was killed by stoning in AD 62 according to Josephus. This latter James was a highly significant figure in the Jerusalem church, as reflected in Acts 15 and Galatians 2-3. A case could be made for saying that the text represents in some measure the legacy of James of Jerusalem, although the present text is a later product directed to the Diaspora. There are difficulties in tracing the document directly to a contemporary of Jesus: the good grammar and rhetoric, the very reduced reference to Jesus, the actual absence of Jesus in the list of good people to follow and, finally, the absence of conflict over the kosher regulations.

James in Greek is Iakobos and the echo of the great patriarch is intentional. In terms of date, sometime between AD 80 and 90 is possible; a much later date is also possible, up to Hadrian’s suppression of the second revolt in AD 135.

KIND OF WRITING

The whole document as such is quite different from the familiar Pauline letters. However, letters could take many forms in antiquity. Beyond that, the variety of proposals regarding the genre is impressive: ethical teaching, catechism for Baptism, Jewish manual adapted for Christian use, Christian wisdom literature. At least, the reigning uncertainty does help name characteristics of the document!

Attention to the words used helps to mark the document as something special: the letter employs sixty-three words not found elsewhere in the New Testament and, of these, ten make their first appearance in today’s reading. This means the letter represents a strand of early Christianity not widely represented in our present New Testament. The letter has a strong relationship with the Jesus’ tradition, especially as represented in Matthew; it has roots in Jewish prophetic wisdom; it fits into the style of contemporary Greek moralists. The current division into chapters and verses does not always help a sequential reading.

RELATED PASSAGES

And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. (Matthew 7:26)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 17 The key phrases are in synonymous parallelism. Cf. James 1:5. Behind the conviction stands the goodness of creation in Genesis and the goodness of God in the Psalms. The echo of Genesis is confirmed by the expression “Father of lights” (= Gen 1:3, 14-19; Psalm 136:7). Consistent with that, variation and shadow are words taken from astrology. V. 17 is a very noble sentiment and has found a permanent place in the Orthodox liturgy (see the prayer below). Verse 18 The metaphor of birth femininity, and yet, be borne by us the word of truth (masculine). As first fruits, we participate already in the final harvest of the new creation. Verse 21 A series of imperatives starts in v. 19, on the good use of the tongue. Good action requires great purity of heart — hearing and doing are inseparable. The only real faith is a lived faith. The “begetting word,” familiar from Stoic teaching, has power to save. Verse 22 Paul and James agree here. See Rom 2:13. Cf. Mt 7:26 above. In James’ view, self-deception is culpable.

Verse 27 This positive statement is in contrast to the negative one in v. 26. Pure etc. may be found elsewhere in Heb 7:26; 13:4; 1 Pet 1:4. In this view, the world contaminates. Orphans and widows are a constant theme: Is 1:17; Jer 5:28; Ezek 22:7; Zech 7:10. Strangers are not explicitly included in this care.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Take time to reflect on v. 17, such an uplifting and encouraging sentiment. 2. The indwelling, begetting word grounds our life in God and stands the heart of both contemplation and action. 3. “Spirituality is whatever I do to make the Gospel come alive in my life.” (Ni- vard Kinsella).

PRAYER

Lord, bless those who praise You and sanctify those who trust in You. Save Your people and bless Your inheritance. Protect the whole body of Your Church. Sanctify those who love the beauty of Your house. Glorify them in return by Your divine power, and do not forsake us who hope in You. Grant peace to Your world, to Your churches, to the clergy, to those in public service, to the armed forces, and to all Your people. For every good and perfect gift is from above, coming from You, the Father of lights. To You we give glory, thanksgiving, and worship, to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and forever and to the ages of ages.

(Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom)
Keep the commandments

Deut 4:1  So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. 2 You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the LORD your God with which I am charging you.

3 You have seen for yourselves what the LORD did with regard to the Baal of Peor—how the LORD your God destroyed from among you everyone who followed the Baal of Peor. 4 While those of you who held fast to the LORD your God are all alive today.

Deut 4:5  See, just as the LORD my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy.

6 You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and they hear all these statutes, will say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!” 7 For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him? 8 And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The reading (slightly expanded above to provide the context) presents the case for the Law (the Torah), independently of the casuistry which arose afterwards.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Deuteronomy has a fairly straightforward structure, as follows:

Preamble: 1:1–4:43
Law-giving in Moab: 4:44–28:68
The covenant in Moab: 29:1–32:47
Testamentary benedictions: 33:1-29

KIND OF WRITING

Preamble Deut 1:1-4:43

1:1-5  Preface (place, time)
1:6-3:29  Moses’s own story
4:1-40  Peroration

The conclusion (or peroration) is especially rich in a kind of homiletic theology. This is the background to our unit, 4:1-2, 6-8, given today as a lead-in to the Gospel reading.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

i) Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise, Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4–9)

(ii) While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. Thus Israel yoked itself to the Baal of Peor, and the Lord’s anger was kindled against Israel. The Lord said to Moses, “Take all the chiefs of the people, and impale them in the sun before the Lord, in order that the fierce anger of the Lord may turn away from Israel.” And Moses said to the judges of Israel, “Each of you shall kill any of your people who have yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor.”

Just then one of the Israelites came and brought a Midianite woman into his family, in the sight of Moses and in the sight of the whole congregation of the Israelites, while they were weeping at the entrance of the tent of meeting. When Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he got up and left the congregation. Taking a spear in his hand, he went after the Israelite man into the tent, and pierced the two of them, the Israelite and the woman, through the belly. So the plague was stopped among the people of Israel. Nevertheless those that died by the plague were twenty-four thousand. (Numbers 25:1–9)

(iii) All the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they shall be afraid of you. The Lord will make you abound in prosperity, in the fruit of your womb, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your ground in the land that the Lord swore to your ancestors to give you. The Lord will open for you his rich storehouse, the heavens, to give the rain of your land in its season and to bless all your undertakings. You will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow. The Lord will make you the head, and not the tail; you shall be only at the top, and not at the bottom—if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I am commanding you today, by diligently observing them. (Deuteronomy 28:10–13)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1  This the start of the exhortation, which invites full commitment to the Torah. Cf. Deut 6:4–9 above. Entry into and residence in the land are always conditional.

Verse 2  The command not to alter the Torah reflects the political covenants of the time and also wisdom literature. Cf. Prov 30:6.

Verse 3  This verse reflects what happened in Ba’al Peor. Although not part of the reading, it forms the essential background (see above). The message couldn’t be clearer: keeping the Law leads to life; breaking the Law brings death.

Verse 4  Once more, holding fast leads to life.

Verses 5-6  For them, the Torah was the summation of practical wisdom. Notice the wisdom vocabulary in the passage.

Verses 7-8  Israel is special because of its God and the gift of the Law. Cf. Dt 5:25, 28:10–13 (given above).

POINTER FOR PRAYER

1. “The glory of God is the living person” (Irenaeus of Lyons) How can we learn to live life to the full? The Torah and later the Sermon on the Mounts are our paths to a life fully lived in God’s presence.

2. A real sense of the gift of faith does have to lead to complacency: it can also lead to heartfelt gratitude and sense of graced privilege.

3. Wisdom, especially of the practical kind, is a very attractive characteristic in someone. What are your sources for living wisely?

PRAYER

God, our guide and the giver of wisdom, help us to receive your word so that we may have life in the Word made flesh, Jesus, your Son and our saviour, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.
The Law was, of course, good and a gift from God. As Paul says: *So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.* (Romans 7:12) The abuse of the Law is another question altogether. Christians have to be careful not to slip into a simplistic superiority or even supersessionism vis-à-vis God’s first chosen people. Excessive traditionalism is not unknown among us!

**THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM**

Psalm 14 is one of many psalms which meditate on the Law and makes for a perfect response to the reading.

**SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS**

**First Reading**

Deuteronomy 4:1-2,6-8

Did you ever feel gratitude for guidance given or for a presence in your life? That’s exactly how the Jews felt and still feel today about the gift of God’s word and God’s presence.

**Second Reading**

James 1:17-18,21-22,27

The letter of James is marked by its direct simplicity, being close to experience. But it can also touch a nerve. After all, what is “pure religion”? Do I live it?

**Gospel**

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Our reading reflects issues of religious law at the time of Jesus. Exaggerated traditionalism was sapping the life out of religion. Of course, this has not “gone away” at all and the critique of Jesus speaks directly to church today.

**WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS**

**Monday 2 September**

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

The Corinthians found Paul a poor speaker and were unimpressed. He turns this around by saying, in effect, “I don’t want you to be impressed by fine speeches and even logic, because as the centre stands the contradiction of the cross.”

Luke 4:38-44

Our Gospel today shows us Jesus as a very busy person who also needed to “recharge his batteries”, as we say. Luke’s underlines throughout the prayer and prayerfulness of Jesus.

**Thursday 5 September**

1 Corinthians 3:18-23

The Corinthians were inclined to think of themselves as spiritually advanced and, in various ways, superior. Such boasting has no place and Paul knocks it firmly on the head.


Usually, the call stories are stripped of all human interest. Luke makes the response of the first disciples more credible is showing that they did indeed have some previous experience of Jesus.

**Friday 6 September**

1 Corinthians 4:1-5

Judi\ng others, especially people in le\adership, is a constant “pastime”, even in earliest communities of faith. Paul has no truck with such human assessments: only God is his, and our, judge.


Jesus was challenged because in his ministry he was not traditional. For example, he did not promote fasting. The early church did take up fasting and our Gospel is an attempt to explain why this is okay even if Jesus himself did not promote it. The marriage symbolism is part of the preaching of the Kingdom.

**Saturday 7 September**

1 Corinthians 4:6-15

Once more, Paul tries to set aside party politics in the life of the community. He gives a very moving account of the lowly role of the apostle—a tour de force. At the same time, he does not neglect to remind the Corinthians of the origin of the faith among them and he (alone!) is their one father.


Today’s Gospel is an funny little story and one could be bold and ask what were the Pharisees doing in a cornfield on the Sabbath!! The main point, however, cannot be missed: Jesus’ ministry was utterly new, calling for novelty in thought and practice.