

In this past week I was in Antrim Hospital visiting patients. The standard practice is that you arrive in, you print off a list from the computer of all the patients who registered as they were admitted as Church of Ireland. And then I go and visit each one letting their rectors know how they are.

Anyway, in this past week I popped down to a ward and this elderly gentleman was sitting in his chair beside the bed. I introduced myself at which point he very quickly replied that he wasn't at all religious. And that's a pretty common response I get from people – they're not religious although they associate themselves as Church of Ireland. And so I replied to the gentleman that actually I was exactly the same – not at all religious. He was somewhat surprised by my reply, especially as I was wearing my dog collar.

And it's true I'm really not very religious. I don't consider myself as religious at all. Religion has taken on a different kind of image today that says to others that they are wrapped up in tradition, and rituals and some things that someone goes through that makes absolutely no sense whatsoever, or goes to church every week but doesn't seem to bring joy to one's personality or loses its meaning and importance.

Religious practice can be a bad thing. What we are going to see in this passage today is that God doesn't want us to be religious. He wants to have a relationship with you, he wants to know you, he wants you to learn from him, he wants you to be led by his Holy Spirit, but he doesn't want us to be led by religious practices that becomes very legalistic.

In our passage Jesus is kind of being confronted about legalistic practices by this bunch of scribes. But why were they coming to him on such matters? Well for that we need to do a bit of digging into history.

Around the 4th or 5th centuries before the time of Christ, around the times of Ezra, the scribes copied the scriptures down so that they could be passed from generation to generation. But around then, Ezra changed all of this for scribes. As a teacher, as Israel were coming back into the land after the exile from Babylon, Ezra was critical and desired to teach the Word of God which they had not heard during their time with the Babylonians.

Listen to what it says in Nehemiah 8:8, "They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read".

So Ezra jumpstarted what it meant to be a scribe. And after that they become known as experts of the law or teachers. But leading up to Christ these scribes became very passionate in their desire to extend the law, so they began to add little rules and regulations. So by the time Jesus came along, this has permeated Jewish society. People were locked into this legalism. These regulations weren't in book form by the time Jesus came along – it was still being passed along orally – but a few hundred years after Christ this was all written down into what is called the Mishnah. The Mishnah was divided into 6 sections, giving answers to how to deal with agriculture, the Sabbath, marriage, disputes, sacrifices in the temple and the purity of food.

It became so much more on the commentary of the Torah – and it became equal to the Law. Over time it became equal to the Word of God.

So this chapter of Mark, begins off with some Pharisees and Scribes coming to see what Jesus was doing around aspects of these laws. And what they discover is that Jesus and his followers are not washing their hands correctly (verse 2 of our reading). Instead of noticing all the things that Jesus was doing they are more interested in how his disciples are eating their food with hands that haven't been washed right. It's incredible to see this when only in the previous chapter – chapter 6, Jesus has just fed over 5,000 people. He then went from village to village and it says that everyone who touched the edge of his cloak were healed. That's the real news of Jesus – it's about healing, restoration, being fed spiritually. But these scribes aren't focused on that whatsoever – they want to find fault in how these regulations are being violated.

But that's what legalism does – it makes people nit-pick and scrutinise what others around them are doing wrong. My sister-in-law and the family are over for a few days from England, and on Friday evening we went out for dinner. Our youngest nephew William is still a baby but before he came out he had been fed some chocolate, and like most babies it was everywhere – you could see it still stuck to him, his hands were covered in chocolate. He was pigging. Now Jesus' disciples were not coming all mucky – it's not that their hands were dirty. It's that they haven't washed their hands according to the traditions that were passed down through the scribes. And Mark here in verse 3 makes it clear that for the Pharisees and the Jews they have a particular way of doing things when it comes to preparing and eating food.

So they decide to confront Jesus. Look at verse 5 – it says that the Pharisees ask him, 'Why do your disciples not live according to the Word of God'. Look again - it doesn't say that does it? It says "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders?". The Pharisees are not taking umbrage at the disobedience of God's Word – they are accusing him of violating the traditions that have been handed down over the years which the Jews have now elevated to the place of God's Word. That's their problem.

And so let's look at verse 6 where Jesus replies to them that Isaiah was right about them – that they're just hypocrites. He quotes Isaiah 29:13 – '*This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.*'⁸ *You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition*'.

Jesus could have come out with all kinds of clever arguments and justification, but instead what he does is he takes their book of tradition, and takes them back to what matters – that is the Words from his Father in Heaven. You see they can't argue with the Word of God can they? He tells them that they have chosen to abandon what God has instructed and replace it with their own traditions which they have power over. Their teachings are of human origin.

So let's think about us for a moment. What teachings are there today that might be of human origin in our society, where the Word of God is not elevated above other traditions. What organisations out there today in our own country exist where people

believe their rules as truth. I could go on all day about these – they are religious, they are ritualistic, they affect our country so much, and as Jesus said to the Pharisees “You abandon the commandment of God to hold to human tradition”.

All of these practices whether inside the church or outside, originate from 2 beliefs.

The first is personal belief. Verse 8 Jesus says that they have abandoned God’s Word for human tradition. The popular belief of Jesus’ time was a system that had been built from hundreds of years of tradition passed down from one generation to another, but that doesn’t mean that tradition is wrong. For example tomorrow I have been invited by a good friend of mine to join his family for their yearly family golf tournament. It happens every year, and now they have extended their family to include Alison and I which is lovely. But those kinds of traditions don’t cause any problems do they. Every family here will have different traditions at times of the year. But what Jesus is dealing with here are traditions that are elevated beyond what they need to be. Jesus in verse 8 is telling them that they have chosen to abandon the thing that should be top priority in people’s lives – the Word of God – and they have chosen to hold more to what man has declared.

Let me share a specific example of a personal belief. One such tradition that our denomination would have is that no one can preach at a church service unless they are licenced, and in order to be licenced you have to be selected first by the Diocese, then trained either as a Diocesan Lay Reader or ordained in order to preach, and that you should always be wearing a surplus. Those are the rules. However in the example of this parish, that would mean that we couldn’t allow Dianne as a member of staff to speak at the front, or Will McCallion, or Michael Ogilby. And yet if God has clearly given them the gifts of teaching why should we take them through a process that by the end may not select them. I agree that in order to teach you have to ensure the person has a heart for God, that they have been gifted by the Spirit of God to teach, and that I support them with any resources or training they might need, but folks if Jesus was to follow our traditional model none of his disciples would have been qualified enough to carry out the task. That to me is an example where a tradition has been elevated to such an extent that it constrains the Church of God to be the witness to the community. Here’s what Paul makes of tradition – he says in Colossians 2:8 “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ”. Paul is signalling a danger that people can be taken captive by the power of human tradition. So how do we check what is right or wrong? Well ask the question, is it in the Bible? That must be where our authority is centred. If we make something up and it’s not in the bible then that’s a man-made religion.

Thankfully tradition doesn’t rule our world in the way that it used to. The thing that does dominate more today is the **second belief and that is personal opinion**. Our society elevates personal opinion so much today. We are surrounded today with many opinions, and no longer is it down to what is true and what is false. If people decide that they want to follow their views and opinions then today’s society says it’s ok. Personal opinion is now so elevated that it trumps God’s Word.

It doesn't matter if as a Pastor I remain faithful to God's Word today, because you can bet there's a church out there that says, well I'm not going to accept your view of God's Word because this is what I believe. Here's what Paul said to Timothy about this (2 Timothy 4:3) *"For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear"*.

So what's happening in Jesus' time is no different to what's happening now. When we exalt our traditions or personal opinions, we circumvent God's Word. If today we allow other religious practices to get in the way of what God's Word says then our faith is empty.

You see empty religion tries to be Godly, but it ignores the truth of what is at the heart of God's desire. What God cares about is what is really going on in here [point at the heart]. That's what he's interested in with you and me. If you are doing things for religious reasons then can I recommend that you stop and start relating to God at a personal individual level like he's real, and alive and someone who you can talk to. That's a real relationship.

In verse 14 - 19 let's look at how Jesus emphasises the importance of the heart over empty religion. He says that whilst things go into the body even if a person hasn't followed the scribes guidance on properly cleaning their hands, they simply go into the stomach and they eventually come out into the sewer he says. But none of these things he says affects what's in the heart. You can follow all the practices, all the religion, all the rules, but what matters is what's in the heart. Verse 20 he then lists the various actions and thinking that actually defile a person, not whether the person has followed correctly all the legalistic rules correctly or not. And he talks about sexual immorality, greed, deceit, slander and so on.

We've got to spend more time being honest with what's going on in our hearts folks, and not pretend by doing the religious stuff of just coming to church and other practices. But it's always been the same. Throughout biblical history the nation of Israel fell into empty religion, there was nothing more than practice. God says about these on many occasions – Isaiah 1 God says "Stop bringing meaningless offerings" or Hosea 6 "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings".

You see when God established these practices, for example the need for sacrifice, he did it to make the people come to their knees and realise the mess that sin brings, the divide that exists between a sinful world and his holiness. Those sacrifices were to demonstrate the mess of sin, that's it's bloody and gory and it brings death. But what people have done through the centuries is to lose sight of the point of worship, and become more focused on the objects around them in worship. God is saying stop playing with religion. He's saying I just want your heart. All this practice that I have taught you is to get you to understand the dynamics of forgiveness and now because you have made it a process, it has become nothing to me. You've truly become religious. There's nothing true about it. He says I want your heart. I want you he says.

David, after his sins, realised what God wanted. In Psalm 51:16 he declared that "*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart*". God wants you today to have a broken heart over how you have been. He wants us to come to a point of being deep down and honest about how we are. He's not interested in the practice, or the going to church, or saying a couple of prayers, that in some way that's going to keep us right with God. That's religion. Remember that God sees the heart – he doesn't see the outward practices.

Folks today remember it's all about the heart. Forget about religion and ritualistic tradition and look to God with all your heart. We all need this reminder because we can slip very easily into religious thinking – by doing more, by focusing on a calendar of events that become more elevated than the Word of God .

Remember at the beginning where I met that gentleman in the hospital and he spoke to me about not being the religious type? Consider what your response might be. Is it that you are religious or is it that you have a relationship with Jesus Christ? Consider that God today doesn't care about the traditions and practices or the religious organisations that you may be affiliated with. In fact they mean nothing to him. They won't have any persuasion in eternity. He wants to know you personally; He wants to talk to you personally. Be honest and ask yourself the question - what does that relationship look like today? If God gets prime spot in our lives then how is that shown in our lives? May you come to a place where your relationship deepens as your religion ceases.