

Sermon preached by the Rev'd Canon Philip Banks
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Sunday 2 September 2018: Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity
Texts: Deuteronomy 4.1,2,6-9; James 1.17-end; Mark 7.1-8,14-15,21-23

Hearts of Love

“Give us pure hearts and steadfast wills to worship you in spirit and in truth.” *Collect for the week*¹

As a family we've had a really super August: two magnificent weeks of family holiday; but I also enjoy the space in August to be able to catch up with friends and family, and also do those things like the dreaded tax return, and having a general clear-out and tidy up of papers and bits and pieces. I don't know if you like me, but I tend to pick up and collect all sorts of magazines and leaflets and bits and pieces – and they sit in a pile and from time to time need a cull. In doing that I came across this newspaper cutting: an interview with the Archbishop of Canterbury² which described the 6-year-old who'd written to Lambeth Palace with a question:

“Dear God,” (presumably hoping that the question would be forwarded on, not that the Archbishop was God!). “To God”, reads the marvellously succinct way of putting one of the most difficult questions known to humanity:

“How did you get invented?? Love from Lulu.”

The archbishop's answer, in which he imagines how God might have replied, is equally marvellous I think. He wrote:

“nobody invented me,
lots of people discovered me,
then they invented ideas about me,
(some sensible some really not very sensible.)
But I sent them some hints,
especially in the life of Jesus,
to help them get closer to what I'm really like.”

“I sent them some hints”.

What hint does the gospel reading we've just heard – Jesus's fiery encounter with the Pharisees – what hints does that give us about “what God is really like”, and perhaps what God hopes we might be like?

Isn't this glimpse we get – something about our great and wonderful God of love of compassion of generosity of gentleness of peace: God willing us, inviting you and me, slowly, slowly as we look deeply into our hearts, as we get to know ourselves through God's loving eyes, to be people who live lives out of that same Christ-like love and compassion and generosity and gentleness? Isn't this about the God of the heart who looks deeply and lovingly into our hearts, that we might live and have hearts of love and generosity?

I imagine the Pharisees wagging their finger at Jesus: “Why, why do your disciples”, they crossly the ask, “why do they not live according to the traditions of the Elders”?

And Jesus simply answers them with scripture – God speaking through the Bible – which probably made them even more cross:

“...you honour me with your lips but your hearts – your hearts are far, far from me. In vain you worship me, teaching human rules as if they were God's laws.

Jesus surely wants to free people from the weight of stifling traditions that tried to legislate for everything, and wants them – and wants us – to live with **hearts** made for love. It puts him at odds with the Pharisees. “Nothing that you eat can defile you – only what comes from your **heart** can defile you.”

Jesus shifts attention away from food laws (important as hygiene was and still is – think of the food safety certificates outside most eateries today) to put moral focus on how I make choices and what people do. It's from the **heart**, says Jesus. Hence this week's Collect: “give us pure hearts and steadfast wills.”

Back to my newspaper cutting: are we seeing any hints yet of what God is like?

Well: if I really believe that the Father and the Son are one, then here we see God-in-Jesus interested in the stirrings of the human **heart**.

God is truly interested in you and me, just as a loving parent should be.

God cares about the personal issues that preoccupy us and influence our choices and my behaviours.

There's a little danger warning light for me though. Popular religion/philosophy often tries to suggest that

- the physical world is somehow bad (or at best doesn't matter);
- and that what matters is the internal – spiritual things.

At first glance we might want to think that that's what Jesus is also saying here. We'd be very wrong though: I don't think that Jesus is saying that just by 'getting in touch with my feelings I'll suddenly discover happiness and peace'. Surely, rather, Jesus reminds us that both good and bad external actions come from internal/spiritual sources. That's the warning light: I can't be lazy and think 'just getting in touch with my feelings will sort me out!' What if my feelings right now turn out to be murderous, adulterous, envious... and all the other things Jesus lists at the end of today's reading?

THAT'S why God is deeply interested in the stirrings of my heart and yours. God-in-Jesus knows that no external laws (food rules in this case) can change people's hearts. It might make us socially conform – but just papers over the cracks.. That's why, at the start of Jesus's ministry he says “set your **hearts** first on the Kingdom of God.”³

When my heart is centred on God I won't get up tight about religious rules and traditions.

I've been reading again on holiday Richard Rhor's daily meditations. He speaks about how our daily encounter with God in prayer – our quiet timer, focussing on God, mindfulness during the day, meditation, quietly resting in God – removes my ego and motives, so that my actions (which come from the heart) come not from my ego but

from God's compassionate **heart** of love: "The only way to create peace in the world is if we find peace in our hearts. Being Peace is the pre-requisite for making peace. Being Peace means responding to everyone we meet with compassion."⁴

Back to my newspaper cutting again. Have we got any closer to what God is like?

At heaven's gate, I think God will look at me and you from his **heart of love** – he won't be asking if I've upheld traditions or preached well. He'll look at you from his heart of love and want to know: did you take time to look deep into your **heart** and live out a life of compassion and generosity, of gentleness and love?

"Give me a pure heart O God" prays the Collect.

Which is why I love that hymn of Matthew Bridges which we sang before the gospel reading. You might want to turn to it again for the few moments of stillness before we say the Creed:

*May God accept my heart this day
and make it always thine,
that I from thee no more may stray,
no more from the decline.*⁵

Philip Banks, September 2018

¹ Collect for Trinity 14, Common Worship

² *Radio Times* interview with the Archbishop of Canterbury, 2017

³ Matthew 6.33

⁴ Richard Rohr (Center for Action and Contemplation) www.cac.org

⁵ Matthew Bridges, 1800-1894 (Hymns A&M, 335)