

June 17th Message

Years ago when I was a worker at a local church before being ordained, I was visited by an older person who saw that my office was reasonably tidy. She came out with the saying: *Cleanliness is next to godliness.*

This is not a quote from the Bible, as some imagine, but was used by the Methodist preacher John Wesley in a sermon in about 1778 and became a saying in the Victorian era to signify the importance of moral purity and personal hygiene.

I am prompted to remember this incident and saying now, because of the current crisis and the call to wash hands thoroughly and frequently, using hand sanitiser, hand gel or soap. Sanitiser is everywhere.

On my way into the Cathedral on June 15th, as part of the opening of our church buildings for private prayer, I squeezed the newly positioned sanitiser dispenser and got such a large dollop that it took quite a while to work it all in and delayed the next bit of filming!

Never have the nation's hands been so clean, and it has helped alongside other measures to stem the spread of this virus, which has proved to be so deadly.

It reminds me of Florence Nightingale, whose birthday anniversary was celebrated recently, and her drive for cleanliness in hospitals. She claimed as many if not more lives were being lost through bad diet, drains and dirt than through the result of war. And what a legacy she left, one that is still bearing fruit today.

This necessary drive for physical cleanliness made me think of an even more important cleansing, which we cannot do for ourselves as we can for our hands. And that's the cleansing of our hearts, an inner cleanliness, which God alone can bring.

The ancient prayer for purity at the start of our service of Holy Communion expresses this well:
Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hidden, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts, by the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love You and worthily magnify Your holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The coronavirus is invisible, spreads easily and can have devastating consequences. So our departure from God's ways and leaving Him out of the picture can't be seen, has a life of its own and has the potential to do huge damage. The Gospel message is all about God's gift of forgiveness, a clean heart, an inner cleansing.

The wonder of the Gospel is the once and for all gift of a new heart, a new nature, being seen as in Christ, a new creation and a new spiritual birth.

As the popular hymn puts it:
The vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

Our eternal destiny is secured when we believe and commit our lives to Jesus Christ.

Or another well known hymn:
*Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine
O what a foretaste of glory divine
Heir of salvation, purchase of God
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.*

That is a once and for all cleansing and needs no repeating. We are seen as in Christ, adopted as children and recipients of eternal life.

But as in a human family we often need to clear the air, to restore relationships and offer apologies, so in our relationship with our Father in heaven we need to come humbly and frequently before Him, to maintain our friendship with Him. A regular pattern of cleansing will help us keep short accounts.

1 John 1.9: *if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us, but if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

So every time we wash our hands, use a sanitiser or gel, may I encourage us to be good at repenting of our sinful thoughts and ways. Outward cleansing will help decrease the spread of the virus, but a cleansing of our hearts will make our churches much more healthy and will further that crucial work of bringing hope and transformation to our local communities.

+ Julian
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