

WEEKLY SERMON

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Mere words and rituals are not enough

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

The man walking down the street was on his phone. But he wasn't holding it to his ear because he didn't want to listen. He just wanted to speak. And what he was speaking was horrible to hear, because he had decided in a public place to tell his girlfriend exactly what he thought of her. The pavement was crowded and no one knew where to look as he ranted on. There is nothing quite as uncomfortable as listening in on someone else's argument.

And yet that is exactly what we do in Chapter 7 of Mark's Gospel. We listen in on an argument between two sets of Jewish people.

On the one hand there are the Pharisees, strict interpreters of the Jewish law who are incredibly careful and studious in ensuring that they adhere rigidly to every commandment and custom laid down in the scriptures.

On the other hand there is Jesus and his followers, a group of reformers who issue a challenge. What is the point of all this rigid cultic adherence if you are not addressing what is going on in your heart? Jesus has the final powerful word as he says: 'For it is from within from people's hearts, that evil intentions emerge...'

That provocative sentence demonstrates that what may at first seem like someone else's argument actually has powerful relevance to us in Western Europe in 2024.

We live in a culture that loves authenticity and is very quick to call out those whose words are not backed up by their actions. Politicians who preach integrity in public life but then lie. Sportspeople who set themselves up as role models but then cheat with performance enhancing drugs. Church leaders who proclaim a Gospel of generous love but then misuse their status or abuse those they are meant to serve. People are rightly quick to call out these hypocrisies.

The words of Jesus speak with real power into this context. Mere words and rituals are not enough. Our Christian faith needs to filter through to every single area of our lives. To believe in the cross means being ready to forgive our neighbours. To declare the justice of the kingdom means being generous in our service of the poor. To honour the God of truth means being truth-tellers in every aspect of our lives.

Jesus was bold in challenging the powerful pharisees. So this week let him challenge you. In what areas of your life can you let your friendship with Jesus change you from within? For faith that is only skin deep is not faith at all.

Rt Rev Philip North, Bishop of Blackburn

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