**Tradition or commandment**  17/3/24 dkm

Read: Isaiah 29:11-24, Mark 7

Text: Mark 7:1-13

Psalms: 23old, 19:7-14, 119:97-104, 134a

Secularism or environmentalism is telling us to turn away from disposable coffee cups, but Hinduism is keenly embracing them. High caste Hindus like disposable cups because it means they do not have to smash their good china. If you, as a low caste person, drank from one of their cups, it would be defiled and they could no longer drink from it. Such people will not eat food prepared in your kitchen lest it be defiled; the mere presence of meat in your kitchen defiles everything. Jews are similarly focused on kosher foods, as well as proper washing of hands, not to mention rules about keeping the Sabbath. Some Christians also focus on outward things, on what you eat and what you wear, but God focusses on the heart.

The Jews were, and are, legalistic, meaning that getting into heaven is all about keeping the law. They were privileged to have God’s holy law, given through Moses. But these laws were not detailed enough for these legalists. Moses gave a command about priests washing hands before temple worship, but the Jews applied this law to everyone; it was about ceremonial purity not personal hygiene. To this rule or law they added all manner of detail, like how to wash and how much of the hand to wash. I suppose if your salvation is a matter of obedience to the law, you need to be sure that you are not breaking any laws. These detailed additions to the Law of Moses grew into a large body of law called the Mishnah. They were finally written down around 200AD. The modern Jewish Talmud combines the Mishnah and Gemara texts.

For the Jew, the Mishnah was as important as Scripture. Christian traditions are just as important as the Bible for many today; they know more about traditions than they do about the Bible. Martin Luther discovered the power of tradition in the Church of Rome. You will find traditions in every church, including our own, but let us never place tradition above the word of God. Let us listen to what Jesus says to the Pharisees, to the people, and to the disciples here in this chapter.

After feeding the five thousand near Bethsaida, Jesus went into the hills to pray. Early the next morning he joined his disciples in the middle of the lake. They landed at a place called Gennesaret, a small but rich plain to the south of Capernaum (6:53). The people of this region recognised Jesus. They told all their friends and soon they were coming with their sick, begging to just touch the hem of Jesus’ garment (6:56). Wonderfully many were healed because of the power and grace of Jesus.

Jesus was still in Galilee when a delegation of scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem showed up (7:1). Jesus had already had a couple of run-ins with the Pharisees: they accused him of blasphemy when he forgave a man’s sin, and of breaking the Sabbath when his disciples plucked some heads of grain on the Sabbath. The Pharisees were religious teachers, as well as religious police. Most resided in Jerusalem because the temple was there, but a delegation was sent to check on a renegade rabbi called Jesus of Nazareth. They came to find fault, not to listen or learn anything. As usual, Jesus turned the criticism back on them, calling them hypocrites with no heart for the things of God. Our subheading are; ‘Not washing hands properly’, ‘Nullify the word of God with traditions’, and, ‘Notable example of nullifying God’s commandment’.

**1. Not washing hands properly**

Coved 19 was sudden shock to our society. We were forced to wear face masks and to wash our hands wherever we went; sanitizer was provided everywhere. In public toilets there are still signs telling how to wash your hands properly. None of this was religious of course; it was to stop the spread of the virus. Washing hands before eating is good hygiene, but this was not the concern of the Pharisees.

There are ceremonial laws about washing in the Old Testament (Lev 15:11), but the Pharisees had gone way beyond these in their effort to be saved by law-keeping. They washed because they may have touched a Gentile in the marketplace, and thus become defiled or unclean. The washing they prescribed was done in a special way; the Greek word refers to the fist or below the wrist.

Matthew records this same confrontation with the Pharisees, but Mark gives a more detailed explanation about ritual washing done by the Pharisees, seemingly for a Gentile audience; some translations have verses 3-4 in parenthesis. Not only hands, but cups and utensils of clay and copper were all ceremonially washed by the Pharisees before they ate a meal. Even couches are mentioned (7:4); sitting on previously used couch is hardly unhygienic!

Eating a meal was a very complex affair for a Pharisee. They could not of course, eat with people who did not follow their rules, as we saw with Matthew and his fellow tax-collectors (2:16). The Pharisees were looking for some ‘fault’ in Jesus or his disciples, and this what they found: His disciples were eating with unwashed hands and therefore guilty of not walking according to their traditions (7:5). They held Jesus responsible for this ‘sin’.

**2. Nullify the word of God with traditions**

How did Jesus take this criticism? Did he say, ‘Sorry, I will have a word with them’? Did he agree to a debate about the law? The Pharisees put their foot in it, as it were, in saying to Jesus that his disciples, ‘do not walk according to the tradition of the elders’ (7:5). These traditions were codified and taught as being necessary to salvation. They were regarded as of equal importance to the Scriptures; in fact, as Jesus points out, as more important than the Scriptures. The word of the elders was more important to them than the word of God.

In no uncertain terms, Jesus condemned this tradition that nullified, or made of no effect, the commandment of God (7:13). He called those who teach such things ‘hypocrites’ (7:6). Hypocrites are people who say one thing and do another, people who appear to be something they are not. The Pharisees made out that they were upholding the law of God when, in fact, their traditions gave lie to such a claim. In Matthew 23 Jesus calls them hypocrites for making long prayers while ripping off widows, and for tithing everything but denying the poor justice, for being outwardly righteous but inwardly corrupt and vile, like a whitewashed tomb.

Jesus used Scripture, namely the words of Isaiah, to define what he meant by a hypocrite (7:6, Isa 29:13). He said that the prophet was actually speaking about them. Isaiah was speaking to the Jews of his day, but the words were applicable to the Jews of Jesus’ day, and indeed to some in our day. The prophet condemned people who worship God, or think they are worshipping God, through rituals, through mouthing long prayers and singing loudly words that mean nothing to them. Their outward enthusiasm, and even reverence, is not matched by inward humility and truth.

Because ‘their heart is far from Me’ their worship of God was ‘in vain’ (7:7). Worse still, these Pharisees were teaching the commandments of men as if they were the commandments of God (7:7). These words are not actually from Isaiah; they are added by Jesus himself. It was one thing to be teaching the word of God, but not living it out; it was another to be teaching what was not the word of God in the first place. The Pharisees were guilty on both counts; they were teaching rules and regulations drawn up by men, rather than the commands of the holy God. They were guilty of laying aside the commands of God as found in Scripture and holding up the traditions of men as authoritative. Being earnest or sincere is not the question. You can be earnest and sincere in worship while deluded as to what is truth. This, tragically, is the situation of many today, even in the church. We must be discerning and not deluded as to what is God’s word, and what is man’s word or tradition.

Jesus did not hold back when it came to hypocrisy by religious leaders, and their false teaching. In the end Luther did not hold back either as he condemned the pope in Rome. We do not hold back either when it comes to false teaching in the church of Jesus Christ. We condemn traditions that nullify the word of God. We condemn scholarship that denies the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We condemn the quest for popularity that permits sexual immorality.

**3. Notable example of nullifying God’s commandment**

In answering the Pharisees judgment of Jesus’ disciples based on the way they washed their hands, Jesus called them hypocrites, and said they were nullifying the word of God by their traditions. He then gives an example of how they were doing this. He referred them to the fifth commandment in the law, namely, ‘Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God is giving you’ (Exod 20:12). Jesus adds to this, from the book of Exodus, the penalty declared by Moses upon anyone who curses his father or mother (7:10, Exod 21:17).

‘Scripture leaves us in no doubt that parents are to be honoured, and that extends even to the way people speak to their parents’ (Morris). The Jews took this command seriously, as do most cultures, apart from ours. But their tradition had the effect of negating this command. This is what legalism does, it negates the commands of God. It negates the very command the legalist is trying to obey. Wanting to maintain the holiness of God’s word in the Bible, some Christians say it must not be translated into the language of the people.

The tradition that arose within Judaism made giving to God, or giving to the temple, a priority. We could be cynical and say this was a self-serving tradition. We know how self-serving the practice of indulgences was in the medieval church, and how Luther attacked this practice in the 95 theses he nailed to the church door in Wittenberg. Traditions are often self-serving to the leaders of the church. Jesus however, was not cynical- he was scathing of the tradition that Mark labels as ‘*Corban*’ (7:11). ‘*Corban*’ is a transliteration of the Hebrew word for ‘offering’. The Pharisees held that a vow offering anything to the Lord was binding, even if, as in this case, it amounted to breaking one of God’s commands.

This tradition amounted to the child telling his parents that he had vowed to give to the Lord what he would otherwise have given to support them in their old age. We might think it strange that the child is supporting his parents in their old age; that is because we have government pensions. In many societies, including this ancient Jewish society, children are responsible for looking after their elderly parents (cf. 1Tim 5:8). The ‘gift’ that Jesus refers to here is understood as money, but the gift of time could be included. The command is about honouring parents, a command that still applies today, despite our ‘busyness’.

Why would the child make this vow about *corban*, an offering to the Lord of what should have been given to his parents? Clearly, something made this a more attractive proposition than looking after his parents. Was it that having vowed this offering to the Lord he did not have to actually give it while he lived? That way he could have used this money to benefit himself rather than his parents. Or was it that such a vow brought favour from the priests- an ancient form of indulgences. Are there modern forms of this practice, or worse? Will elderly parents soon be encouraged to kill themselves so the money that would otherwise be spent on them could be better spent?

The Pharisees must have been taken aback by this attack of Jesus upon their great scholarship. It would have taken a lot of men a long time to come up with such a clever way of getting around the clear commandment of God. Jesus could have gone on with many other examples, but is seems the Pharisees did not hang around (7:13). ‘Tradition was regularly being enthroned, and God’s word dethroned’, and this continues today.

One example from our day with regard to man’s ideas being given more weight than God’s word is the teaching of evolution, a well-entrenched ‘tradition of men’. Charles Darwin was a clever fellow, like the Pharisees. He knew the Bible, but did not regard it as the inspired word of God. With the help of other clever men, he came up with the teaching of evolution, a teaching that nullifies the teaching Genesis 1-3, and therefore the whole Bible.