

**Sermon 29 August 2021, Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity
Benefice Service Lt. Houghton**

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

It is a very interesting experience to go to church other than your own to lead a service. You are normally greeted warmly followed by the words "It's straight forward, the same as you normally do, everything is in the book". What they fail to tell you is that incense is used every week, or the banns are read before the intercessions, notices come before the blessing and the priest doesn't take communion to people in their seat and so on. It's all the same, except when it's different!

The fact is, all churches have their own traditions and peculiarities in the way they "do" things, even though the service is basically the same. So, the art of visiting clergy is to preside at a service of worship which values the Gospel and is offered to the glory of God; but without upsetting anyone's personal applecart!

Every organisation has its traditions, as do all families. How many times have you said to your children as they come in Have you wiped your feet? Or before dinner "Have you washed your hands? What seems repetitive, becomes traditional, and then goes on to provide continuity with the past, whilst also creating a sense of community. However, the trouble with tradition is that it can become set in stone and distract us from what is really important. This is what Jesus criticised his fellow Jews for when he said: "You think you are good people by observing all the traditions about external things, without caring about their spirit".

In our gospel today, some Pharisees and scribes made the journey from Jerusalem to see Jesus and his disciples, primarily to nit-pick and find fault, because that's what they did; they then pounced on the fact that some of the disciples did not wash their hands before eating. Not that I'm saying don't wash your hands before eating, just that it's not the be all and end all.

Jesus could see that their criticism of the disciples was aimed at him, and it came from their love of the law and their joy of feeling superior to everyone else. It was not their way to have compassion or understanding for others.

I am sure that there are times when we can all dig our heels in and claim tradition as the most important thing, especially in our church life. Hymn singing can be a bone of contention when your favourites are not selected every week, we think of Hymns as traditional but there was a time when clergy were sent to prison for daring to introduce them to worship. Pews and organs can be time-consuming items at PCC meetings, yet these were only introduced to churches in Victorian times, they are relatively new in the whole scale of the history of the church, but how we cling on to them! It is good to have stability but the truth is that nothing remains the same forever; if it did it would mean we would never free to develop or explore new ways of doing things.

If we become entrenched by tradition and continually want things "as they have always been" we can adopt a false comfort zone, a "we're alright attitude", and we prevent ourselves being open to others. Before we know it, we become a church that will not attract the unchurched generations in our midst.

From September, the Benefice will be adopting a new worship service pattern which has come about in response to the survey undertaken by those on the electoral role. This will give us varied services of worship designed to suit as many people as possible, but more importantly, we hope it will appeal to those

The Wymersley Benefice of Cogenhoe and Great Houghton
and Little Houghton with Brafield on the Green

who live in our parishes who have yet to find God.

The decision could have been made to revert to the way things were before Covid 19 struck, but it is obvious to all that regeneration in our churches is required, and that is the responsibility of all of us, not just the clergy. Please give the new pattern of worship your support. If there is a service you prefer in one of the other churches of the Benefice other than your own, please travel to it if you can. If you enjoy coming to your church, support whatever service is on whether it is to your taste or not, also, invite a friend and bring them along. Above all talk about your faith and your love of God, don't keep it as your secret, during this time of uncertainty, people are searching for something to hold on to that gives meaning to life, show them what you have.

In his criticism of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus is saying we should examine our own motives in all things and live from the inside out, because it is what lies in our hearts that determines our actions. Sticking to tradition for tradition' sake has the potential to do more harm than good and could stifle the growth of his kingdom. Jesus is not interested in external things, like pews vs seats, modern music versus old or other human distractions.

His message is there for us all to examine our own hearts and motives in order to become aware of the needs of others, and welcome new Christians to the fold.

In our first reading, James tells us we are to imitate God's goodness and not worry too much about our own likes and dislikes, but to look at the wider picture to make life good for everyone, and if we do that often enough, it will become natural and goodness and generosity of spirit will define us.

After the challenging period of Covid, which is not yet over, we now have the opportunity to try something new to revitalise each other and to address the issue of falling church attendance. Please be open to the changes and give us your patience and support, so that together we can work to grow God's kingdom in this Benefice.

Amen

Reverend Irene