

Mark 7:1-23

The mistake I made, now I can look back, was five churches on the first morning. My wife is a patient woman, God knows she needs to be a patient woman, but five churches on the first morning of our holiday was too many churches. It was about four too many; it is even possible it was five too many. The upshot was that for the next two weeks she kept count. 'Ah', she said brightly, in Bruges, 'the forty-third church'. Now that was unkind and it was also unfair; by my reckoning it was only the twenty-seventh. I should not really say this, but, it appears, you can have enough of church.

Now, at the risk of making the same mistake again and inflicting on you what I inflicted on her, I need to say something about church and about religion. We have been in southern Germany, in Italy and in Belgium. We crossed the reformation divide. Southern Germany is catholic – catholic with a capital C, gilt cherubs, madonnas wreathed in lace and golden angels blowing silver trumpets above the pulpit; but in Augsburg, where Luther appeared before Cardinal Cajetan, you will find a spare, stripped down church, all plain glass and bare boards. In Ghent, Protestants pulled down altars, smashed statues, scattered the relics and danced on the ruins, but then the Catholics returned and up went altars of dizzying scale. For two weeks we saw churches with a point to make; churches that lock hold of your eyes and assert that here we do things this way because that is what God wants and elsewhere they do things another way, because they are plain wrong.

There are wonderful things in these churches, but there is also a parade of difference and division. These are churches that highlight our differences. And it is that particularity we have to think about this morning because we have a bit of the gospel in front of us in which Jesus talks about what defines us. It was Mark's gospel. Mark's gospel is the gospel that keeps asking 'Who is Jesus?' and never quite answering the question. Jesus is surrounded by critics, by enemies, and by followers and none of them seem to understand. 'Who is Jesus?' It's in Mark's gospel that the disciples are at their most baffled.

We heard a highly edited bit of chapter seven. The reading told us Jesus was talking to Pharisees and scribes. It tells us later he spoke to the whole crowd – verse 14

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand

The edited reading did not tell us that, by the end of the passage, he had gone into a house and was talking only to the disciples. We missed altogether how that conversation started,

his disciples asked him about the parable. He said to them, "Then do you also fail to understand?"
Mark 7:17-18

That's an important part of this gospel, that change of focus, the different groups, the different expectations, and that sense of mystery, that brooding uncertainty about what exactly might be going on.

And Jesus talks about the food laws,

"there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."

Now, strangely, in this gospel of confusions and mysteries, everyone seems to be absolutely sure that they know what this conversation is all about. Jesus is sweeping away the food laws of Israel. The Jews thought purity came from obedience to the law. Do this and you will be saved. Fail to do this, disobey the law and you will be evil. And Jesus challenged that. Jesus said that evil is more complicated than that. Jesus said evil has to do with character, the way you are, not the things you do: *the things that come out are what defile*. It is really quite simple; it is really rather neat, and it's really very improving. The moral of the story, it seems, is that conformity in religion (all those laws) is bad for you, but spirituality, thinking about the way you are inside is good for you.

So, the argument goes, all those Protestants and Catholics, all that religious difference is quite wrong-headed. Jesus just wants us to be spiritual. Jesus was not interested in religion, he cared about values.

And do you know? That is really not what Jesus meant. It is very definitely not what Jesus believed.

We need to try just a little bit harder. Scripture is not difficult, but scripture is serious, you only get to the meaning if you read it seriously. The author here, is Mark, the man who thought that there was an element of mystery in the gospel. Or, to put it rather better, Mark thought that the truth had still to be revealed. It was a work in progress. The pulse that beats all through this gospel is that there is more to come; there is a deeper truth, a greater glory to be revealed. *Keep Awake* says Mark 'ye know not when the lord of the house cometh'.

And that is the conviction behind what Jesus has to say. When Jesus tells the Pharisees that their hearts are far from him, when he tells the disciples that they must learn to speak from the heart, they will instantly have caught a reference that was deeply familiar. It was the mention of *hearts* that did it. Everyone knew that God had promised his people a new heart. That is promise of the Psalms; it is the leading idea in the prophecy of Ezekiel. Jesus is talking about the kind of people we can become as God completes his work in us and gives us the heart we need.

Jesus says that to scribes and Pharisees as the passage begins. He then explains it to a larger crowd and finally he speaks to the disciples alone, the ones who should have understood and did not. That is not sloppy story-telling, as if Mark cannot sort out where Jesus is and who he is with; this is deliberate. Jesus is speaking to very different people with very different assumptions, he is deeply conscious of what separates them and he is offering them the one thing that might unite them, a shared future in which they become one in God, the people they should be. He is reminding them, of the day when they will be of one heart.

There was a snatch of John Lennon's song *Imagine* on television the other night

*Imagine there's no countries...
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too*

My son gave me a pointed look. My son thinks that John Lennon was a genius and suspects he may be on to something. My son is not alone. There is a shared conviction, at the moment, that religion is a dangerous thing.

Terrible things are being done in the name of religion while I am speaking to you. We all recoil from the horrors perpetrated in the name of faith in Syria and Iraq, and in Nigeria. And, before we get too judgmental, let's remind ourselves how often Christianity has walked to mass with blood on its hands. Small wonder that we have become suspicious of religion, small wonder we associate it with fundamentalism, mindless obedience, and cruelty. Small wonder that so many of us prefer to speak of spirituality, of values and tolerance.

Let's be clear. Jesus was never an advocate for the violence religion does. Tested and tempted he resolutely refused to play that game, he suffered rather than take up arms. He was the victim, he was never the conqueror. The gospel is not an invitation to turn religion into power. Bad religion is very bad for you. The temptation within religion, within our religion for that kind of badness is huge. Faith is forever teetering on the edge of making a bid for power. The gospel does not justify that.

But neither is the gospel determined that we should give up on religion and become really spiritual instead. Let's try to be clear again. Spirituality is not bad, spirituality, which usually starts with a reverence for creation, a reverence for other people, and a reverence for freedom is a much less dangerous than religion as power. The trouble is that spirituality cannot save you.

*Imagine there's no countries...
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too*

What John Lennon imagined was quite specific

Imagine all the people living for today

That's what spirituality can offer, that's all spirituality offers, making the best of the moment. If we treat each other with reverence and have reverence for freedom, we will be more tolerant, but all we can ever offer one another is space and independence. Better than violence, I agree, but it is not salvation. It is a shared *hope* we need. We need a destiny we can share and an account of ourselves that is robust enough to challenge us and be challenged by us. That is what the gospel is a glimpse of what we might be together and an account of the God who secures that future. That is what religion brings.

When Jesus stood before the Pharisees, talked to the crowd and interrogated and taught his disciples he did not tell them to tear up the rule book and forget their religion. He was not urging them to forget the externals and turn inwards. He reminded them instead that when religion becomes power, 'Do this, do not do that' we all become so fascinated by watching one another that none of us look to a different future. One of the subtle, dangerous temptations is that we will all settle for the best that we think we can do. We will opt to try just a bit harder. That is dangerous because it is the moment we look for a mild improvement and stop longing to be transformed. The promise of the gospel is the promise that we can finally be free of the obsession with ourselves, free to be what God will make us.