

Sunday 2nd September All Age
(Song of Solomon 2.8-13; James 1 17-27)
Mark 7 1-8,14,15, 21-23

There used to be a popular saying that my Grandmother said a lot, but you don't hear very much, any more: 'Cleanliness is next to Godliness.' In my Grandmother's day, cleanliness was something that needed a lot of effort. A lot of people didn't have proper bathrooms or toilets *inside* their home and many filled their hot water tank once a day. When the hot water ran out, they waited till the next day, because heating water was expensive.

Even when I was at primary school, my best friend lived in a house with an outside privy and when Sunday bath night came around, she filled a tin bath with water from the kitchen boiler, using a long metal arm that swung out and had to take a bath in the middle of the kitchen. Until recent times, keeping clean took a surprising amount of effort, but for a long time, people have understood that cleanliness is part of wellbeing.

The saying 'Cleanliness is next to Godliness' is very old. It was quoted by John Wesley, the founder of Methodism (Sermon 88, 'On Dress' 1791) as well as the philosopher-statesman, Francis Bacon in the 17th century (Advancement of Learning, Book II, 1605) although it first came from much earlier, Hebrew Talmud and Babylonian traditions.

Jesus was familiar with the laws from Moses about washing, especially before meals. In our reading today, Jesus meets some Pharisees and they notice that some of Jesus' disciples don't wash their hands properly. Pharisees wash everything: their hands, their food, cups, pots, things from the market, bronze kettles and so on.

Jewish Laws are very wise, because they make people have good hygiene. In Jesus' day, following the washing rituals wasn't about germs, because they hadn't been discovered yet, but about faithfulness to God. An observant Jew washes before eating so eating with dirty hands is unholy. The Pharisees are offended to see that Jesus' disciples don't wash properly. They protest to Jesus and say something like, 'Your disciples are dirty, they eat with dirty hands!'

Jesus knows that eating without washing is unclean, but he also knows that the Pharisees want to criticise him. The Pharisees would rather criticise people than help them come closer to God.

Jesus says 'You are very strict about keeping your hands clean and following religious rituals, but God sees into your hearts. Your hands might be clean, but your hearts are unclean! It's not what a person does on the outside that matters to God. It's what goes on inside that really counts.'

Jesus tells us that we must pay attention to what goes on in our hearts. If we dwell on things that take us away from God, that is what makes us unclean in God's eyes, not our traditions or rules about washing dirty hands.

The Pharisees are probably annoyed with Jesus for saying this because it is a lot easier to wash our hands, than wash our hearts, but Jesus knows that what the world needs is a way to come back to God, through washing our insides, not our outsides.

In our service today, we have two baptisms. In baptism, we also have a type of washing ritual. We are baptised in water, just as Jesus is baptised. But our washing, is a washing of our hearts, to make us right with God. God cares about what goes on inside us, but God knows that we can't wash our hearts, so when we are baptised, God washes our heart with the Holy Spirit, through our faith in Jesus.

Baptism is a symbol of new life. We pass from the old life to a new one through the water, just as the people of Israel are saved, by passing through the waters of the Red Sea.

Today, when Tamzin and Danny are baptised, they are given new hearts and clean lives. They receive this because of the faith of their parents and Godparents until they are old enough to believe for themselves. And as members together, in the family of Christ, we are pleased to journey with Tamzin and Danny, as they go through the water of baptism to join us, as new members of the Church today.

Amen.