

WEEK 3: TUESDAY

'Germs and Jesus!' shouted the seven-year-old son of a friend of mine. 'Germs and Jesus! You keep telling me they're important and I can't see either of them!'

A fascinating response to a pressing parental problem. We tell our children about Jesus. We also, at a different level, explain to them that they must wash their hands because there are things called 'germs' which we can't see but which do nasty things if we don't wash them off. Jews in the ancient world didn't know what we know about germs (they didn't know what we know about Jesus, if it comes to that) but they knew how important it was to wash before meals. Physical purity, with its echoes of national purity (always important for a small and embattled nation), had been elevated to an art form, with careful rules precisely formulated and exactly observed, at least by those who chose to do so. There was a considerable spectrum in Judaism at the time of Jesus, from those who were eager to find and follow the ancient legal traditions more precisely to those who didn't bother too much, either because they weren't pious or, perhaps, because they weren't well off and couldn't afford the time for all the extra fuss.

The Pharisees were a popular pressure group devoted to keeping one another up to the mark of the strict rules, and doing their best, as far as they could, to apply them to other Jews as well. Physical purity made as much sense then as it does now, and without modern soap and other aids to cleanliness there was a lot of practical wisdom, as well as traditional religion, about the rules. But, as often happens in such systems, rules led to more rules, regulations to more regulations, and the original purpose was always in danger of being lost underneath.

So when the Pharisees challenged Jesus about the fact that his disciples weren't keeping the purity traditions in the proper way, Jesus reacted with a counter-charge of his own. What happens when traditions, however venerable, cut across what scripture itself said? He gave as his example a piece of special pleading. You could, in his day, make a formal declaration that the money that could have been used to support your parents was instead 'given to God' — thus neatly getting out of the open-ended, and often sad and messy, business of looking after the elderly. Scripture has been overthrown, as Isaiah said would happen, by human tradition.

This passage has been seized upon down the years by people eager to make a similar point in relation to the growth of various kinds of tradition within the church. And it has to be admitted that all segments of the church (including, paradoxically, the streams of Protestantism that have protested about other people's 'traditions') are quite capable of producing traditions which manage to get around what scripture actually says. Tradition matters because, so we believe, God hasn't stopped working in the lives of his people by his Spirit. We have learned a lot over the last two thousand years which shouldn't just be thrown away. But there is always the chance, in every branch of the church, that the traditions will take on a life of their own and distort or deny some key bit of scripture. This passage should remind us of that danger. Lent is a good time for the church to examine itself on this question.

Jesus then took the occasion to develop his own vision of purity. He didn't say physical cleanness didn't matter. What he did say was that inner purity was far more important. Following deep strains of thought in scripture itself, he warned that the human heart is the source of the greatest pollution, and that nothing in human tradition can purify it. The implication is clear:

Jesus is offering a cure for the polluted heart.

That was the real bone of contention between Jesus and the Pharisees. They were supporting a system which, at its best, was pointing forward to God's great desire to find a purified people for himself. Jesus was claiming that God was now doing this, through him.

They were setting up signposts; he claimed to offer the reality which made the signposts redundant. Here is the lesson for us: following Jesus, allowing him to cleanse us through and through, puts us in direct continuity with the ancient scriptures, and enables us to discern the good and the less good in human traditions.

TODAY

Gracious Lord, teach us so to love you that we may find ourselves transformed by your holiness; and save us from human traditions that would imprison us in our own inventions.