

Order of Service

August 29th, 2021

Lighting of the Christ Candle

Jésus-Christ est la lumière du monde.
Jesus Christ is the light of the world.

Call to Worship

People of God, let us make room in our hearts
and silence in our minds.

Let us prepare ourselves to remain present
before the ever-present God, wherever we are.

With what shall we come before the Lord

And bow ourselves before God on high?

He has told us, brothers and sisters, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of us,
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with our God?

Opening hymn: #436 God, we praise you for the morning

Prayers of Adoration and Confession with assurance of pardon

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses

as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil
– for thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
forever and ever. Amen.

Hymn # 667 God, you touch the earth with beauty

Scripture readings:

Psalm 15

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

Sermon: “Change within”. (Text of sermon is attached after this Order of Service)

Hymn # 710 What does the Lord require

Prayers of the people

Closing hymn # 314 God is love: come heaven adoring

Benediction

Change Within

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 20-23

Some years ago, I was part of the initiative in my home congregation, to open the doors of the church building and offer a tour to eventual visitors. If you know the St. Andrew and St. Paul sanctuary downtown it is easy to see why this was a good idea. There is indeed plenty to see and admire, from stunning stained-glass windows to the magnificent organ, it is a place filled with beauty and tradition.

Many visitors came and I was in charge of the francophone ones. Interestingly, the majority of the francophones who came were from the Montreal area. They were intrigued by this church with its doors always closed and wanted to take a look. Many of them were from Roman Catholic background, of course, that denomination being at the core of the French culture that colonized this territory. A church that had so huge an impact on the people of this province and that was closely associated with the state until the “Quiet Revolution.”

So, I was delighted to answer to all their questions during those tours, because they usually had many! From “why don’t you have statues of Mother Mary?” to “what are those numbers hanging on the walls?” You could see that they had no idea about our worshipping traditions, let alone our theology.

I was delighted and honored to be the one who could explain, although briefly, how things work for us. And many times, I would hear “the” question: “But, this is a Christian church, right?” And mind you, they were being perfectly honest and respectful. They just had no idea about the Reform, Luther, Calvin, or the Protestant churches for that matter.

If you read a little about the life of different religions in the world at large, not only within the Christian culture, you can easily find that since the beginning of

religious institutions, human beings have shown differences in their understanding of sacred texts, schools of thought, and worshipping rituals. Within the same religion, you will almost always have different groups. And we know, from experience, that within those same groups, like within a certain denomination, there are different streams: orthodox, moderate, liberal...

In Jesus' time, this was also happening among the Jews. We know there were at least three different schools within the Jewish religious life: the Essenes, the Sadducees, and the Pharisees. The latter two appear in the gospels, as you know. They are those who challenge Jesus and, some of them, finally plot to kill him. Together with the scribes, they are portrayed as the "religious establishment" who could not or would not see Jesus as the Messiah, the one sent from God.

I know we have made them the "villains" in the gospel story, and no doubt the authors of the gospels saw some of them as such. But we need to bear in mind that they were highly respected at the time because of their commitment to the Law of Moses, the Torah. And I think it goes without saying, they were not all the same.

However, those who are portrayed did enough to be stigmatized by Christian culture. I am sure that none of us would like to be described as a "pharisee" so negative the word sounds to us.

And yet, historians tell us that these Pharisees were the largest and most respected group among those three. Not only did they respect the Torah -which is the five first books we have in the OT- but they would interpret that law whenever possible. So by the time Jesus started his ministry, the Pharisees' interpretation of the Torah had become a very well-established oral tradition. In other words, what the Pharisees taught was not only the written word that we have kept in our bibles, but their interpretation of that law. Imagine then the impact of the oral Torah, what

the Pharisees said, among a people who could not read -which was the lot of the large majority in ancient times, by the way. Imagine also the kind of power that this religious group had over the people. The authority that they embodied.

It is indeed that authority, that power, that Jesus challenges time and again in the gospels. The text we have read today is an example of that. Jesus' disciples are seen eating without having washed their hands before, which was considered against the mosaic law by the Pharisees. Hence their question: *"Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?"*

We need to bear in mind here that this is precisely the Pharisees' interpretation of the law. In fact, as a scholar explains, there is no biblical law concerning all people washing hands before eating, only a law about priests having to wash hands and feet before ministering in the altar, which include before eating the holy meat from the sacrifices made in the Temple. But the Pharisees may have taken very seriously the command from Exodus 19:6 "You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" and so made extensive the law of washing hands before eating to all people of Israel.

There is, then, an excess of zeal in the Pharisees' interpretation of the Torah. An excess of zeal that would make the life of Jewish men and women almost impossible. With that kind of understanding of the law, the Jewish ordinary people would have had to wear a sort of "religious corset" that would make them walk upright but on the brink of suffocation at every step.

Well, we know how Jesus reacted to that. Indeed, all through the gospels Jesus is recalibrating, as it were, the pharisaic interpretation of the mosaic law. He

is not, in any way, against the law but against the abuse of the law in the hands of certain elites. And usually, like in our reading today, he snaps at those elites.

In our reading Jesus calls them “hypocrites,” uses scripture to rebuke them -a passage from Isaiah and ends his invective with a compelling : *“You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”*

Jesus explains his reasoning in the verses that we have skipped today -you can easily read the whole passage by yourselves. But the essential content, the teaching in this situation, we did read.

“Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. (...) “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. ²¹ For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²² adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

It is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come.

It is from within.

Jesus is always refining our perspective, changing the level of the conversation and of our understanding of what is important to God and what is not. Even for us, who may easily see the Pharisees’ excess of zeal as a problem and who have long abandoned the idea of “unclean” food, Jesus’ teaching remains a challenge. Because that refinement of perspective, that need to go deeper in our understanding of what is important to God, continues to take place all through our lives as individuals, but also throughout the much longer life of the church. And so we change. And our church changes also. For some of us, more attached to certain traditions, the change is painful. Others welcome it with open arms and hearts.

What is undeniable is that change in our understanding of what is central to God, and God's work in the world, always happen. Some Christian communities, denominations, may take more time, but change happens.

One thing remains, though. Jesus' challenges are always the same and are always part of our own change. Two thousand years ago or today, Jesus' teachings apply.

So, how do we respond today to his words? How do we go deeper in them? Well, different groups and communities of faith may have different answers to these questions but let me suggest today that we all need to start in the same place.

It is from within -Jesus tells us- from the human heart, that evil intentions come. Evil things come from within, and they defile a person.

In biblical terms, the heart refers to the innermost part of a human being. The heart encompasses thoughts, emotions, and will. It is the place where the discernment between good and evil occurs. It is the seat of our physical, mental, and spiritual life, where God accomplishes the most wondrous work in us, where He transforms us. It is where God's words of love and justice should be engraved, in our innermost centre.

To me, the next question is obvious. How is our heart doing? What is happening within us? Within each one of us? Then, how do we go about searching our own hearts to be aware of all those things that can separate us from God, and from one another? And while we are there, in our hearts, can we see other things that we may add to Jesus' list, maybe not as "evil intentions" but as difficult emotions that risk to "defile," to distort our relation to God and one another? Anger, fear, a feeling of worthlessness perhaps, of powerlessness, of hopelessness?

And if we go from the individual to the collective level, how is the heart of our community doing? What fears, conflicts of interest, compromises are tearing us apart as a community, and separating us from God? To what extent our interpretations of sacred texts are working like religious corsets that do not let us breath deeply and expand our understanding and experience of God in everyday life? To what extent is our church today a reflection of a Pharisees' establishment? Do we realize *when* we are abandoning the commandment of God and holding to human tradition? Maybe that is the kind of question that we should always be asking ourselves if we want to be a healthy community, a community with a healthy heart.

I believe that when we start and keep asking those questions we have a better chance to avoid the risk of excessive zeal. We are inviting the Spirit of God into the Holy of holies I may say, that intimate, most sacred place of the Temple. But what the Jewish people used to see happening in that sacred room in the Temple, Christ has shown us that is taking place in our hearts, our own Holy of holies. It does not happen outside, it happens within.

The grace of God works in the hearts of each one of us and in the heart of the community, refining our perspective and orienting us towards all that is good, all that is loving, all that is just, and then it manifests in the world. God in Christ changes us and in doing so, He changes the world.

So let us pray that we may be able to see what is going on in our hearts and in the heart of our community and let ourselves be transformed by the grace of God's Spirit within, humbly trusting that both at the centre and beyond all the differences and conflicts that we may be experiencing, Christ is at work. We only need to walk humbly with him. Amen.

