

What Defiles (Mark 7. 1-23)

© Sarah Bachelard

So here are the poor old scribes and Pharisees getting it in the neck again. Obsessed with questions of purity, missing the wood for the trees, unaware of their own hypocrisy – as if God would care about whether we wash our hands when there’s justice to be done and mercy to be shown. Lucky we know better. Lucky we’re clear about what really defiles (and what doesn’t), and can focus on the state of our hearts without having to concern ourselves with petty religious rules about handwashing, pot cleaning, and dietary observance. For, as Jesus says, ‘there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile’ (Mark 7.16).

Except, at the risk of contradicting our Lord and Saviour, is it quite that simple? Whatever happened to, ‘you are what you eat?’ Or our own knowledge that some of the things we take in – tobacco, alcohol, pornography, violent television, too much screen time or take away – can indeed affect the state of our being? How actually do we discern the relationship between what we take in and what comes out? These are questions provoked in me by today’s reading – so I’m hoping we can take a closer look.

Jesus’ teaching in this passage is structured in relation to three audiences. It begins as a response to the religious authorities; it’s extended to the crowd; and then explained in more detail to the disciples – and, perhaps significantly, there are some subtle shifts in emphasis along the way.

The question that provokes the whole episode is put by the Pharisees and scribes. Having observed Jesus’ disciples not washing their hands before eating, they ask him: ‘Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?’ And this way of posing the question suggests that their main concern is to do with proper observance of the tradition – that is to say, the oral

interpretation of Mosaic law they deemed authoritative. Eating with unwashed hands is cited as evidence of the disciples' (and by implication, Jesus') non-conformity. The fact that this is their main concern comes out in the way Mark sets the whole thing up. He explains in a narrator's aside that 'the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders', and Mark gives examples of 'many other traditions that they observe'.

Tellingly, this is where Jesus begins his response. He doesn't start by declaring all foods clean; rather he disputes their assumption that the 'tradition of the elders' is authoritative. He quotes Isaiah rebuking the people of Israel for setting up 'human precepts as doctrines', and accuses his accusers of hypocrisy. They're implicitly charging him with putting himself above the law, but this, he says is exactly what they do. 'You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition'. He gives the example of one of the religious loopholes allowed for by this tradition of the elders, namely the practice of Corban which means willing your assets to the Temple so that they may no longer be used to support your parents, thus circumventing the truly religious imperative to 'honour your father and mother'. 'And you do many things like this' (Mark 7.13), Jesus says.

Three times, then, he accuses them of abandoning, rejecting and making void the word of God 'through *your* tradition that *you* have handed on' (Mark 7. 13). As commentator Elizabeth Webb puts it, Jesus makes clear that he 'is not rejecting the law; in fact, he is rebuking them for their failure to uphold it'.¹ Or as Isaiah put it, 'This people honours me with their lips; but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me ...'. This is the context then, in which Jesus turns next to the crowd who've been hovering nearby. Isaiah spoke of the hearts of 'this people' being far from God, and Jesus now addresses 'this people'. 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the

¹ Elizabeth Webb, 'Commentary on Mark 7', *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/ordinary-22-2/commentary-on-mark-71-8-14-15-21-23-4>

things that come out are what defile'. Don't get hung up on these legalisms; getting the rules right does not relate you properly to God, and does not compensate for the state of the heart. Focus your attention on that.

Well, as is to be expected in Mark, the disciples don't get it, so Jesus provides further explanation. And notice here that his emphasis shifts a little. His concern for the state of the human heart now leads him to say more about what it is that truly defiles a person – and it's not the food we ingest that simply passes through the system (thus he declared all foods clean). What defiles, he says, are 'evil intentions'; the direction of defilement is from the inside out, not the outside in. Webb points out that most of the 'evil intentions' Jesus mentions are in some way, 'sins of consumption' – theft, adultery, avarice, envy, pride – 'each springs from a desire to take, to grasp, to own, to devour'. So, she says, by the end of the passage, 'Jesus has turned the whole notion of consumption that defiles on its head'.

And yet, as I said at the beginning, this is where things get a bit complex – because we know there are things we can take in from outside that tend to corrupt the state of our being; that affect, not just our physical health, but our imagination, our will, our ways of relating, our heart. So how are we to take account of this?

I wonder if we need to distinguish a couple of things. First, we need to be able to disconnect true religion, the right honouring of God, from puritanical rule following. We need to let go the illusion that our successful performance of humanly devised holiness codes will guarantee our goodness, or that any of these 'traditions' justify our treating others without mercy or compassion. As if say, in the case of the Taliban, a religious law requiring women to be completely covered in public, could ever justify their being shamed, punished or murdered for non-conformity.

For Jesus, what really matters is that we tune in to what's going on at the level of our heart; that we become capable of recognising the intentions and impulses that take us away from right and loving relationship. And yet, once we do this, don't we also begin to grow in awareness of what feeds or strengthens these malign intentions or less helpful impulses? Almost paradoxically, then, this can awaken us to the need for certain kinds of rule or discipline in relation to what we 'take in' from

the outside. For, as I've said, there are things we do well not to consume because they affect how we see and act, and deprive us of the liberty, clarity and power we're called to. What seems important to recognise, however, is that these things may be different for each of us.

St Paul tackles just this question when he discusses whether it's permissible for Christians to eat food sacrificed to idols. Some of us, he remarks, know that the gods represented by 'idols' do not exist and so it doesn't really matter if we eat food sacrificed to them. 'Food will not bring us close to God', he says. 'We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do'. (1 Cor. 8.8). At the same time, he notes, there are some who are still inclined to think that food sacrificed to idols means something: 'they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol' (1 Cor. 8.7). And to the extent that this is on their conscience, for them to eat such food *is* to be defiled by it – not because of the food per se, but because (for them) it means they've been less than wholehearted in their allegiance to Christ.

And I wonder what this suggests to you? What do you know, in yourself, you're better off not consuming? What sense of compromise follows certain indulgences, certain 'in-takes'? For me, I know there's something about checking the news obsessively on my phone that leaves me feeling dissipated, cloudier, and vaguely compromised. For you, screen time, the news might not be an issue ... but it might be something else ...

We're all too aware in these days of the terrible destruction that fundamentalist religious rule-following can wreak, the profound cruelty that masquerades as righteousness and is justified by appeal to tradition. Jesus wholly rejects this kind of religion, and insists that we don't become righteous by being hyper-scrupulous, upholding and enforcing puritanical laws. We become righteous by tuning in to the heart and thus learning to recognise what really does defile – acquisitive, destructive ways of relating; *and* self-compromising habits that fuel these ways of being and so undermine our capacity to be who we're called to be. It's as we yield *all this* to God that we become wholly available for the life God longs to live in us, and so sharers in God's whole-hearted love for our world.