

Sermon Archive 599

Sunday 16 August, 2026

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Discerning God's priorities

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Context: What came before the "then"

Our first reading will begin with the sentence "**Then** he called the crowd to him, and said to them . . ." "**Then**". What had happened before "**then**"?

The story is unfolding in Gennesaret, which in those days was a few days walk from Jerusalem (about 130km). Who would have expected a group of Jerusalem Scribes and Pharisees to appear so far from home? What was so important to cause them to come all that way? Well, they come to the point immediately with their single question: "why don't your disciples wash their hands?" To our ears, it sounds like a silly question - not worth the walk. In fact it's not a silly question; it's a hostile one. The accusation behind it is that Jesus doesn't understand God at all, because he's not pursuing one of God's priorities - the traditions and practices about ritual cleanliness - avoiding things that are hated by God. If Jesus cared for God, he'd be more scrupulous - he'd require his disciples to be more careful. What was so important to cause the Pharisees to walk for several days? It was an opportunity to argue with Jesus about what is important for God and people.

The accusation seems to trigger Jesus, because he races out of the starting blocks in the spirit of "you want to talk to me about God's priorities!? Well consider this: the fifth commandment commands us to honour our parents, to treat them honourably. This isn't tradition - this is scripture. But I have noticed (he says) that when push comes to shove in arguments about making offerings in the temple, when it leads to material hardship for the parents of the donors, your regular advice has been "give the money to God" and forget about the parents. Be scrupulous about religious duty - don't sweat the human cost. It is important that God be paid.

In **our** times, we've all heard about churches shaming parishioners into giving money to the church when it means sending children to school without breakfast or raincoats or shoes. It is more important that God's wallet be filled,

than for the children to be warm and fed. The American Biblical Studies Professor, Frederick Dale Bruner, says "There is a devotion to God that hurts God because it hurts people". What is important? The Pharisees suggestion that Jesus is out of step with God's priorities really annoys him. He calls them hypocrites - people who say holy things but whose hearts are really as far from God as possible. They are in no position to lecture Jesus on what is important.

One imagines the Pharisees absorbing the force of this public hand grenade, turning around there and then, and heading off back to Jerusalem.

That's what happened before the **"then"**. And so, we turn to our reading. It begins with "then" . . .

Lesson: Matthew 15: 10-20

Reflection: Let's reflect on that public argument

With the crowd having witnessed his argument with those who purport to know what is important to God, Jesus seems to feel a need to speak some more. The Jewish purity laws of Jesus' time were full of regulations about what to eat, or not to eat, so that nothing unclean will enter the human system. In the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, there were lots of laws about it - interestingly not about the washing of hands - that seems to be pure community tradition, rather than a word of God. Strategic error on the part of the Pharisees for focusing on that, then.

Jesus makes the point that nothing that goes into the mouth (no food) has the capacity to defile the heart, to upset someone's relationship with God or neighbour. Food isn't going to corrupt the human heart. He goes on, in quite a base, slightly vulgar way to say that rather than corrupt the heart, food just passes through the system and is turned into food for the toilet. Pardon my French - he's saying that that kind of religious concern eventually turns into "shit". Not one to pull punches, our Jesus seems to think it more important to make the point, than to be seemly or to leave people confused about what is important. The people say to him "you know that the Pharisees were really offended by what you said. He says he doesn't care. They're blind people, leading other blind people into a pit. Let them alone - they're not important.

Rather than what is eaten, he draws our attention to other things that might make a home in the human heart - things like evil intentions, murder, adultery, immorality, theft, false witness, slander - all of which hurt people

out there in the world of our relating to one another. These things are causing much harm in the world - they are more important than what ends up in the toilet.

When Peter asks him to explain this to him, because he's struggling to get it (such is his immersion in the purity practices of his tradition), Jesus expresses frustration. "Are you, Peter, also without understanding!" It's like he's hoping that importance is something that ought to be obvious. But in this culture it isn't. They're tripping over it all the time - giving energy to silly things, hostile things, pointless things, when God's heart is burning for the welfare of the people.

I wonder to what extent we feel that some of the concerns of the church, in our times, are focused around things that are not important. I wonder if we, ourselves, like Jesus, feel that it's fairly clear when we're focusing on the wrong priorities. What are God's priorities? I can think of one or two things which have absorbed the church's energy over the last few decades which I believe have presented the church to the world as a movement completely out of touch with proper priorities. Bombs fall on innocent civilians, and the church ponders the rainbow bedroom. To me, it seems obvious that the priorities are distorted. Is it obvious?

Thank goodness we have Jesus to stand tall among us about priorities that bless the people in their need. Don't worry about tradition, and who eats what, and who is to be excluded. Eating with unwashed hands does not defile - he says. We pause for reflection.

Music for Reflection

Lesson: Matthew 15: 21-28

Reflection: God's priorities prevail - eventually

Meanwhile, even further from Jerusalem, in Tyre and Sidon, a young woman is suffering greatly. The official diagnosis is "torment by a demon" - and whatever that is, it sounds terrible. We don't use the word "torment" to describe things that are easy. Also tormented is the young woman's mother, who's doing what many mothers do when their child is suffering. She's out there trying to find help in any kind of form. The question is: is this important?

She cries out to Jesus. Jesus' response is not to answer her at all. That's a fairly strong signal on the ground that he doesn't consider this important. Nor do the disciples; they advise him to send her away - because she keeps on shouting out - as the anxious parent often does. This anxious parent is a Canaanite - a member of an unclean people. It is important to steer clear of what is unclean. "There is a devotion to God" says Bruner, "that hurts God because it hurts people". What is important? We have given thanks earlier in the story, because Jesus just instinctively knows what is important, and speaks publicly for proper priorities.

Despite his profound insight in this matter, it's as if there are still prejudices to be pierced in how he sees this principle applying to those who are not part of his people - the Canaanite woman and her filthy daughter. "I've not been sent to people like you", he says. "I've come for the lost sheep of Israel, and I'm not throwing their food to the dogs.

God's priorities? What is important?

Even to Jesus, whose wisdom is great, and whose love for the world is overflowing, and who's just argued with people who "don't get it", there are blind spots - pits into which the blind might fall.

The mother manages to find a retort that brings Jesus to a new place - a greater mercy for those his culture excludes. It takes him a real world experience after his preaching of priorities to get him (even him) over the line - but that crossing of the line is magnificent for the God of whom it is said "God so loved the world".

I said earlier that Jesus seemed to say to his people that God's priorities are obvious. Only the blind would not recognise them. But it takes him a second skirmish in the world to produce peace. "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed from that moment.

We, who seek peace for the world, seek to discern God's priorities. Probably it will take us more than one attempt - and we'll get there only after we engage with those crying out for help. Following Christ, we seek to be alive to all that interactive thing.

But for now, we keep a moment of quiet.

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