

We all have an impression of the Pharisees as “bad people” who did nothing but load rules and regulations on already religiously burdened people and did no positive good.

But having looked into it for this talk, I don't believe they were intrinsically bad people – they had decided that it was important in their own very diverse Jewish culture to give everyone a concrete and clear way to be Jewish and not let themselves become indistinguishable from the increasingly secular world around them at that time.

They had set up contemporary practises for putting their view of a biblical lifestyle into the world – so that they could hang onto their identity. Some called this the **tradition of the elders** and this is referenced by Jesus in our reading.

It was their way of earning favour with God. So at the time of Jesus, the Pharisees were following a largely man-made religion, meticulously adhering to a long list of rules - but sadly their focus was on the rules and not on their relationship with God.

In Deuteronomy it states that the purpose of the law is to point to God's faithfulness. Obedience and adherence to the law was a way of celebrating man's relationship with God. Obedience was not the thing that created that relationship. Obedience was a response to the relationship that God had chosen and initiated.

The Pharisees had taken the practice of ritual hand washing - which was set out back in Moses' time, in Exodus, for priests to do in the Tent of Meeting before they approached the altar - and applied this to all Jews making it a requirement before eating.

They had been watching Jesus with eagle eyes looking for any slip up that they could use to attack his credibility. They noticed that his motley crew of fishermen, tax collectors, labourers and other marginalised individuals were not washing their hands before eating. They weren't following the rules. At last something concrete they could accuse him of.

Now hand washing before eating is an excellent thing to do, with proven health benefits. But they demanded it as a requirement for a religious person. They believed those who washed were righteous and those who didn't were pagan. They focused on external rituals rather than the heart. And as they were so focused on all this external stuff, they wrongly believed they were righteous and didn't need saving.

Also remember that at that time water was a precious commodity – it had to be drawn up from a well and carried to where it was needed – so not an easy turn on or off of a tap as we have it now. So normal working people really couldn't always adhere to this tradition of the elders and do as the Pharisees asked.

We can so easily become like the Pharisees and be a bit smug and condemn those who don't measure up to our standards. Even take the practices during our different Church of England services – when to sit, stand, kneel, turn this way to face the bible being read, bob up and down during the creed, cross ourselves – if someone doesn't know the routine they should not be excluded – we should make sure we are welcoming all.

We can have the most liturgically, historically and theologically precise tradition of worship and welcome. But none of this matters if we're not actually loving God and loving others.

Nothing matters if we're not actually in relationship with God and our neighbours.

Nothing matters if we're pointing fingers and casting judgement on others.

None of these traditions have anything to do with our salvation.

God's love and grace is a free gift to all – even when we are being hypocritical and worrying about who is doing the right thing around us.

God's invitation is to come to the table and be filled by his gift of forgiveness and it's for ALL of us – even if we haven't washed our hands!

Traditions can be helpful – and are normally established with good motivations. But whenever we follow a tradition we should make sure we are evaluating the motivations. Remembering that man looks at the outside, but God can see the heart.

If we now turn back to think about our first reading today - Psalm 15. It sets out a list of virtues needed before we should communicate with God. And para-phrasing from The Message translation we should “walk straight, act right, tell the truth, don't hurt your friend, don't blame your neighbour or despise the despicable. Keep your word even when it costs you, make an honest living and never take a bribe.”

So we could be like the Pharisees and use it to measure our own and one another's worth to be in a relationship with God. Or we could, as I believe we should, read it as an ideal model for the sort of life we should aspire to – remembering at all times God's goodness to us – totally unconditional love with no strings attached. So if and when we veer off the perfect path set out in this Psalm, he's still with us, he knows we're only human and with his help we can try again to follow this ideal.

And we should apply this to all those around us too – it's very easy to say that we're being inclusive – but are we really? Are we judging and measuring? It's really not our place to do this.

Let us pray that as we seek to grow in our love for God and love of our neighbours that we may be ready to let go of the man-made structures and traditions around us – and extend unconditional and genuine love to all.

Amen

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