

PRINTED SERVICE FOR SUNDAY 29TH AUGUST 2021

Prepared by Rev Jo Jacobs

'What's the most important thing about a teapot – or How healthy is your heart?'

Call to Worship

Loving God,
Open our eyes to the beauty of your holiness;
Open our ears to the message of your word;
Open our minds to the challenge of your truth;
Open our hearts to the power of your love.
Open our lives to the coming of your Spirit,
That we may truly worship you,
Now and forever.

Hymn STF 455 Robert Bridges (1844 – 1930) based on Joachim Neander (1650 -1680)

All my hope on God is founded;
he doth still my trust renew,
me through change and chance he guideth,
only good and only true.
God unknown,
he alone
calls my heart to be his own.

Human pride and earthly glory,
sword and crown betray his trust;
what with care and toil we fashion,
tower and temple fall to dust.
But God's power,
hour by hour,
is my temple and my tower.

God's great goodness aye endureth,
deep his wisdom, passing thought:
splendour, light and life attend him,
beauty springeth out of naught.
Evermore
from his store
newborn worlds rise and adore.

Daily doth the almighty Giver
bounteous gifts on us bestow;
his desire our soul delighteth,
pleasure leads us where we go.
Love doth stand
at his hand;
joy doth wait on his command.

Still from earth to God eternal
sacrifice of praise be done,
high above all praises praising
for the gift of Christ, his Son.
Christ doth call
one and all:
ye who follow shall not fall.

Reflection

We once owned a very nice hand-thrown pottery teapot. It was given to us by a dear friend, and we put it in pride of place on an open shelf in the kitchen – but it became not fit for purpose – it was waiting for a good clean out. If you used it, the tea tasted odd, had bits in it, and probably would be unhealthy to drink. Until it had a ‘deep clean’, we used it as an ornament, an item of memories, and not for the purpose for which it was intended.

A visitor to the house however, might unwittingly use it. It’s a bit like cleaning the kitchen work surface – it might look clean, - but is it germ free? We all know a lot more about germs and viruses now than we did 2 years ago. We understand how they are transmitted and how to safeguard yourself and others from catching them. We have lived through a time of battle with an unseen enemy, so at every opportunity we have washed or sanitised our hands and obeyed the rules. Obeying the rules of living in a time of Covid has been our greatest defence.

The Pharisees were very concerned that Jesus’s disciples were not obeying the rules. They were not washing their hands in a ritual way before eating food. So, not only were their hands defiled, but they were not observing the traditions of the elders. Throughout the Gospels Jesus seems to be on the receiving end of criticism from the Pharisees for all sorts of reasons, but mainly because, in many instances, Jesus did not appear to be observing God’s Law, as they understood it. And that’s the nub. – as they understood it. They seem to be as old wineskins that are unable to contain the dynamic of the new wine. The new wine is illustrated in the previous chapter with the feeding of the 5,000 – no where to wash their hands on an isolated hillside – so does Jesus send them away hungry, for want of a bathroom? Following that miracle, Jesus goes to Gennesaret, and is overwhelmed by the multitudes flocking to him to be healed. No evidence of him not being able to touch unclean people. Later in chapter 7 he heals the persistent Gentile woman’s daughter, and the deaf and dumb man from the Decapolis, a Gentile region – non-Jewish people, so not on the Pharisees radar.

And yet, the question raised by the Pharisees is a sincere one, because it indicates how seriously the law of God is to be taken, and since Jesus is obviously a religious teacher, why don’t his disciples take seriously the tradition of the elders, which protects the law, and preserves holiness?

Jesus explains that observing tradition is not a sign of holiness, but that of the state of their heart. The condition of the heart, whether debased or pure, is far more critical than the food one eats or whether you’ve washed your hands before you eat it. The lack of holiness does not come from not observing God’s law, but what is going on in your heart regarding your attitude to God and to others.

James writes about the perfect law that gives freedom. Think for a moment about laws and rules, who makes them, and whether they give freedom or constraint. For instance, our road rules, in this country, say that we should give way to traffic coming from our right. In that way, everyone, eventually, has freedom to proceed. If you don’t obey that rule, it’s a free for all, probably ending in a crash, and then no one’s going anywhere for a while.

But what about our church rules that we impose and put up round our buildings, the impression we give when we welcome people to our church and immediately tell them officiously where they can and cannot park or sit.

These are rules that can become embedded in our hearts, and can clog up the perfect law of God which should have it’s rightful place there. The amazing thing is that a healthy heart, that is one that is implanted with God’s word, is evident on the outside by our actions and by what comes out of our

mouth. James reminds us to be quick to listen, slow to speak (that is, don't say the first thing that comes into your head) and slow to anger.

Going back to those needy Gentile people that Jesus healed after the altercation with the Pharisees. Neither of them knew much about ritual purity or the tradition of the elders, but both knew about the divine grace that made them whole.

Jesus wasn't sent by God to maintain the old order, or even patch it up, but to inaugurate something entirely new.

Are our hearts in the state to accept that teaching?

How healthy is your heart? Is your teapot fit for purpose?

Amen

Prayers

Lord, I know your commandments off by heart

But that is only the beginning.

Your kingdom is beyond the recitation of the familiar.

Write your law of love not upon my memory only,

But upon my heart, so that it is strained and tested daily. Amen

We live in an age of clamour, confusion and uncertainty, Lord, and it is hard for us to understand it, see reason for it, and to know how to react to it. We pray for a wise solution, we pray that the world might unite against evil and mindless atrocities. That there will be peace and freedom, where now there is war and bloodshed, fear and distress.

We pray today for those we know and love, and for those we do not know, but have heard their story, of fear and persecution, illness and frailty, bereavement and sorrow.

We pray that your presence would be close to them, that they might find your comfort for their fears, your strength for their weakness, and your love in a dark and lonely place.

We pray for this church and others in our town, that they may be beacons of light in their communities, places of refuge and acceptance, places of love and hope.

We pray for the Christian church across the world, knowing that many people are persecuted for their faith, that they worship in secret, and have little access to the Bible and the preaching of God's word. Help us, Lord, who worship you in freedom, to have the courage to use that freedom to witness to our families, our friends, neighbours and work colleagues to bring about your kingdom where you have placed us in the world.

In trust, we pray

In Thee, O Lord, do we put our trust.

Amen

Hymn STF 508 Brian Doerksen (b. 1965)

Purify my heart,

Let me be as gold and precious silver.

Purify my heart,

Let me be as gold, pure gold.

Refiner's fire,

My heart's one desire

Is to be... holy;

Set apart for You, Lord.

I choose to be... holy;

Set apart for You, my Master,

Ready to do Your will.

Purify my heart,
Cleanse me from within
And make me holy.
Purify my heart,
Cleanse me from my sin, deep within.
Chorus

Blessing

The love of the faithful Creator,
The peace of the wounded Healer;
The joy of the challenging Spirit;
The hope of the Tree in One
Surround you and encourage you today and always. Amen.