

Song of Solomon 2:8-13  
Psalm 45:1-2, 7-10  
James 1:17-27  
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

## Losing the plot!

Jesus is mightily ticked off by the Pharisees in this passage from St. Mark. He seems annoyed at those who are tattling on his disciples (and no-one likes a tell-tale) for not washing their hands before eating. This was important at that time, just for the same reasons it is today. For years my daughter would come out of the bathroom and present her little hands to prove that she had washed them. But that isn't really the issue; there is more to it than this. This accusation veils something more unpleasant and Jesus knows this. It is the hypocrisy of the accusation that angers him, not the accusation itself. We've all felt this – righteous indignation at someone who points the finger, points out faults in another. Jesus lashes out at them; he tells them he has their number, *“Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites...This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me....” teaching human precepts as doctrines.” This is a distortion of the Word of God.”*

The main thrust of Jesus' anger is against the hypocrisy of the religious authorities who have spent their time creating human laws, in this case the food laws, which were critical for healthy eating at the time, cooking pork well, separating raw from cooked foods, washing cooking pots and hands well, all needed and necessary. But which have become *“a distortion of the Word of God.”* In teaching these human things as doctrines, read the book of Leviticus: it's all there, they have lost the plot!

Jesus goes on to tell them *“For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”*

It seems to me that there is no shortage of these evil intentions in our world today; the Madoffs, the Sanfords and this man who abducted a young girl, just the latest in a long line of cheats, liars, adulterers and predators. But before we get too comfy in our self-righteousness, let's remember that we are none of us immune from these things. These people got caught, their public lives played out in the glare of media attention. There probably isn't one of us who has not been guilty of pride or mean-spiritedness at some point or other. We all delude ourselves if we think our outward profession of goodness hides the deeper, more shadowed places in our hearts from God. It is the human condition to hide our vulnerabilities and weaknesses. What amazes me is that we have such high expectations of our leaders and yet it seems that we have infinite patience and forgiveness for those in entertainment, who are far more likely to be role models for our children.

Don't lose the plot, Jesus calls out to us. We know what we are to do: the epistle outlines it for us: *“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”*

Widows and orphans, the most vulnerable group in the Middle Eastern world in Jesus' time and probably still the most vulnerable group in most parts of the world – think of Darfur.

As I listened to the eulogies and thanks for the life of Senator Edward Kennedy it struck me that every now and again there is someone who comes by, who is not flawless, but whose actions are deemed by most to be based in integrity, and whose actions and life's work demonstrate the welfare of widows and orphans in their heart. A visit to his website showed the focus of his 46 years of legislative work was in looking out for the vulnerable. I am sure not everyone cared for his political positions, but no-one can take away from him the fact that he signed into law much of this country's work to support the vulnerable; be they seniors, women and children or the poor.

Ted Kennedy was a committed Christian. No stranger to the Word of the Lord. He learned, as we all do, the work that Christ commands us to do. Christ gave us the plot. We have a script; it is in the word of God, written for us to learn and digest. The Living Bread we heard in John, the Word of God that gives us life. In the epistle we hear we are *"a kind of first fruits of his creatures."* We are, after all, the creatures that not only have language, but the ability to discern from the word of God what the Way is, to read it, hear it, wrestle with it, and to witness to it in our lives.

The gift of compassion, of altruistic giving, is also unique to us, at this moment in evolutionary history. Our task is to follow the commandments at the very least and to resist, as best we can, the evil intentions that beset us all. Above all, our role is to take part in supporting those who are vulnerable by following the one commandment Christ gave us – "love one another as I have loved you."

Widows and orphans were the most vulnerable group in the world of the Hebrew Scriptures and in the time of Jesus. In our current-day world there are children and women abused and afraid of those who should protect them and care for them. This church has their needs at heart. This church tries to help them start over with Women Aware. So too with the poor; this church turns up at Elijah's Promise to feed them. And for the sick; this church rallies to support them, in our community and in the wider world.

For me, the summing up of all we are is caught up in the first lesson we heard today, in the Song of Solomon. It's a love song, pure and simple. We are the object of that love. That is the point of all that we learn. It is from love that we can care for the vulnerable, that we are capable of compassion. To follow the way of Christ is to be unable to turn away from the vulnerable. To love one another is to love all who hurt, are sick, and are rejected and oppressed – because that is how Christ showed us the way.

So when things get a bit Churchy, about policy and practice, in the wider Church and in our local church, let's remember these words of Christ today, and remember to stick with the plot. +

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