

Mark 7: The Heart of Holiness and Baptism of Levi Kabano – Robert Innes

This week marks for many of us the beginning of a new term, the beginning of a new year. Tomorrow the schools re-open for a new academic year. And I've been pleased to talk this week with some small children who are really looking forward to starting school again. Isn't it wonderful to have that kind of excitement! It has, actually, been a marvellous summer, with lots of warm sunshine, and I hope that you are feeling, as I am, deeply refreshed for the work of a new year. And this morning, its particularly good to begin a new academic year, with the baptism of baby Levi, because baptism symbolises the new start of Christian life. A new term, a new academic year, a new life.

I've no doubt that Emil and Saskia chose their little boy's names very carefully, and Levi is a good Jewish Christian name. In the Bible, Levi was the third of the 12 sons of Jacob. He became the father of the tribe of Levi. This was an important tribe because it became the clan that was assigned priestly duties. The Levites were required to keep particular rules of holiness and purity because they were the priests who looked after the temple and the religious aspects of Hebrew life. The Christian name 'Levi' came into fashion particularly under the Puritans, maybe because the Puritans had an especial concern for living holy and pure lives. And Levi has a whole book of the Old Testament in his honour, the book of Leviticus, the book which deals mainly with the functions of the Jewish priesthood.

Now our gospel reading today seems a rather strange one, being about the rather arcane world of Jewish food laws. But it could be a rather important one for Levi. Because at issue is this question: does living under God's will mean living according to Leviticus? Does living a good and holy life mean following the rules for the priests set out in the Old Testament. Or to put the question another way: what, according to Jesus does it mean to live a good and holy life? If we imagine 80, 90 or 100 years from now when baby Levi is a very old man how will he be able to come before God with the sense that he has lived well and honourably before his creator?

Different people have different views as to what is involved in living a good and a moral life before God. I was reminded of this when we went on holiday earlier this month. For the first time, our family flew on a budget airline. (I know, I've lived a very protected life.) Amongst our fellow passengers was an Orthodox Jewish family – the man very distinctive in his traditional dress with beard, black suit and tall hat. Also a Muslim family: a man, three young ladies and one baby. Now one of the things about low cost airlines – as compared with traditional airlines – is that you don't get to choose where you sit. As it happened, the Jewish family seemed to understand the system well and they all got seats together at the front of the plane. The Muslims, like our family, well we all got split up and sat right at the back. But there was a problem. One of the Muslim women did not at all like her seat. She announced loudly: "I am a Muslim, and I am not sitting next to a man." Fortunately, our stewardess was excellent and was obviously used to handling these kinds of situations. She persuaded the Belgian man to move to another seat, and arranged it so that all the Muslim women were only sitting next to other women. For this Muslim family, it was a matter of decency, of morality, or religious purity, that their women should not sit next to strange men.

And this, it seems to me, was exactly the same instinct of the Pharisees in Jesus day, as it has been for religious people of all kinds including Christians from time to time. Being holy, being pure, means keeping yourself separate from certain other kinds of people. The Pharisees were what we might call a holiness movement. They wanted to extend the rules for priests to everybody. They wanted the ceremonial rules in the book of Leviticus to guide the whole community. And they were critical of Jesus and his disciples for their moral laxity, for their lack of care in doing the requisite washing of hands and kettles and cups.

In reply, Jesus is very firm. He calls the Pharisees hypocrites. He accuses the Pharisees of honouring God with their lips but not with their hearts. All this ceremonial and outward show does not reflect the inward disposition of their souls. Rules designed to preserve outward purity, laws which keep the faithful separate from the sinner, these are not of the essence. It is not physical things like ritual washing or certain kinds of foods that defile a person – it is wrongful moral attitudes that defile us. Jesus sets inward purity against ritual purity.

Now baptism has sometimes been thought of as a kind of washing – the washing away of sin. But that isn't the whole of it. Otherwise, whenever we did anything wrong we'd need to come back for another baptism, another wash. The symbolism in baptism is more powerful, more scary than that. The water of baptism is about drowning and death. In baptism, someone dies to an old way of life, and rises again with Jesus to the new life of the Spirit. Baptism is about a change of heart.

In Mark chapter 7, Jesus does something radically new. He declares authoritatively that the way to live under God is not by following many kinds of religious rituals and rules, it is by allowing God to change our hearts. From here on, all those ceremonial rules in the book of Leviticus, do not count. Saskia and Emil do not need to bring little Levi up to follow the rules of Leviticus. The heart of holiness lies somewhere else.

To be a Christian is to be born anew. It isn't a matter of having my passport stamped with all the right religious rituals. Occasionally I think some people imagine that the spiritual journey is a matter of collecting all the right kind of visas that will admit you to heaven. There is the baptism stamp, the first communion stamp, the confirmation stamp...and the game is to collect all the stamps in the right order. Well yes, these things have their place. But God is surely not like a kind of State Official sitting behind his desk at the pearly gates carefully making sure that candidates for a residence permit have all their papers in order.

So Jesus says quite authoritatively “holiness, goodness, purity – these are not things that you catch from outside you. They come from inside. They grow from the heart. So also unholiness, evil, impurity – these things too are rooted in the heart ”

And just in case his hearers haven't got the point, Jesus lists a whole lot of vices which don't come from eating the wrong foods or lack of religious ritual, but come from within. Here they are: “evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, indecency, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.” 13 of them. What do they have in common? Well they are a mixture of attitudes and actions. Arrogance and malice - they are wrong attitudes; theft and adultery are wrong actions. All of them, directly or indirectly cause harm to other people: slander and

deceit cause moderate harm, whilst murder destroys life completely. Jesus was never someone who would have said: “it’s the thought that counts”. He was concerned with the totality of thoughts, actions and attitudes which harm other people and offend God.

To put it more positively, “love the Lord your God and love your neighbour as yourself”. That is how Jesus sums up the whole of the Old Testament law. That is the heart of holiness. It is with that intention that we are called to bring up our children. It is with that guiding principle that Saskia and Emil are asked to train, shape and bring up their little son Levi. To love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves –that is the essence of a good life.

But before we conclude, let’s just return to those Pharisees for a moment. Was there so much wrong with their concern for ritual washing and eating the right food? Insofar as it made them self-righteous, insofar as it made them feel superior and separate from sinners, it wasn’t a good thing. But all these purity rules, like the clothing rules of the contemporary Jews and contemporary Muslims also have a good intention – which is to help the community define its identity. Orthodox Jews today wear special clothes because they want other people to treat them as Jews. They want to feel Jewish.

All faiths need certain practical things which give their communities identity. All of us need things which remind us ourselves and remind other people that we are followers of Jesus. Some people wear crosses on their lapels, other people put fish signs on their cars. Now you might think these outward signs aren’t the point. After all, nowhere in the Bible are Christians commanded to wear symbols of their faith.

It would seem to be more in line with Jesus teaching, that we Christians have certain *practices*, rather than certain *clothes*, which identify us. If handwashing no longer reflects our devotion to God, then what kinds of activities and practices mark out our spiritual lives and identities? How might another person be able to tell that you follow Jesus? It could be your commitment to public worship, your pattern of private prayer, the way you keep the Sabbath, the voluntary work you do, the way you practice forgiveness...

At the start of this new term perhaps that is something we could all think about. The pious Jew keeps the Torah, the faithful Muslim obeys the Qur’an. What about the good Christian? What are the four or five things that I do regularly that mark me out as a follower of Christ? What are those practices in my life which signal to myself and signal to others: “yes, I am a Christian”. The answer will probably be different for each of us. And especially for Saskia and Emil, but for all of us who have responsibility for children: how will we bring them up so that they know distinctively they are followers of Christ, that their baptisms are cashed out in lives shaped decisively for good? Amen.