

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
2 September, Pentecost 14
Rev. Anneke Oppewal,
Mark 7: 1- 8, James 1: 17-18



At first hearing you may wonder why Jesus seems to criticise Jewish leaders for washing their hands before they eat. Isn't that best hygienic practice? You guessed it! It's not about that! People at the time had no understanding of hygiene and bacteria the way we do. And neither did Jesus.

The issue is about ritual cleanliness as an outward sign of piety that put up barriers between people who were "in" and people who were "out". Not only between Jews and Gentiles, but also between Jews who had the time and the money to follow those laws to the letter and others whose circumstances made it much harder for them to comply to the high standards set by some of the Jewish religious elite.

In this text Jesus declares these distinctions invalid and asks the question how such external things can make a difference spiritually. In Jesus' book God is for everyone, and if there is a law, a rule, or a tradition that excludes people, clearly that law, rule or tradition is wrong.

This was radical. The way Mark tells it, it was ridiculing divine commandment. (and that's perhaps why Matthew and Luke both take the radical edge off in their rendering of the story). Mark encourages us to focus on the attitudes of the heart and rethink our approach to tradition, even to the law, if need be, and to focus on love, on inclusion, on people. Biblical commands never take precedence over what is compassionate and caring. We are still learning that and we wrestle with it. Because it is so much easier when everything is well-defined, well-organised, guided by clear rules that never change.

In a small way it has been one of the things we have encountered while growing into a new communion practice over the last year or so. On a larger scale it plays a part in our openness to and relationship with the world around us. Our Church is full of traditions that create barriers for those who are not part of the Church and we would not take kindly to anybody ridiculing them. And yet. That is exactly what Jesus does, according to Mark, in order to break those barriers down and connect with people where they are, as they are. Breaking bread on a green hill somewhere, meeting them on the road home, sharing their lives, participating in their day to day lives without inhibition or reserve. Amen.