

Good morning. When I saw a few months ago that Townfield was to have a series on St Mark's Gospel, I hoped that I might be able to take some part in it, as St Mark is my favourite gospel. Some people have said "well, that's because it the simplest one" and I'm not sure I like what they might be suggesting.

But this morning's passage isn't a simple one. The first part is something that might well cause me to fall out with some of the congregation and the second part contains some stuff that is quite hard to fathom at all, and about which some of the commentaries I looked at definitely argued. [[I don't usually have that problem, but I have more material to help me study Mark than about the rest, so I can see the squabbles between theologians more easily.]]

So let's get started with what might be one of the most important pieces of Jesus' teaching and the change in world view he presented. "Nothing outside a man can make him unclean by going into him, For it doesn't go into the heart but into his stomach." And the writer adds that "in saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean".

Yet the Jews had a massive collection of rules and regulations about what was clean and what was unclean. I think that most of us know that Jews don't eat pork and bacon, but it extends far more widely than that. No prawns. That's a rule I found out for the first time when I was at a Chinese restaurant with a Jewish lady. And the principle that milk and meat must be separate is a very important one. So a turkey and cheese sandwich is definitely off the menu, though obviously cheese and ham would be even worse.

Yes, this matters. In the times of the Maccabees, King Antiochus Epiphanes tried to force the Jews to eat pork, and they died in their hundreds rather than doing so.

And now, we have a Jewish teacher saying that it doesn't matter: nothing that goes into the body will make it unclean. Now, maybe nothing much would have been made of this at first, as it was just part of a debate between Jesus and the Pharisees and scribes. But when they left the crowd and went into the house, his disciples asked him about it. Well, Matthew tells us that actually it was Peter. And after Jesus has explained about food not being what makes people unclean, Jesus launches into an explanation of what it **is** that makes us unclean. And this too is a radical change to what had been seen before.

And if I talk about this in any detail, you'll get cross with me because it sounds judgemental. That's because it is! There is nobody that meets the standard set: the standard is perfection, and we have all sinned and fallen short. Fortunately, the same man who tells us the list of things that make us unclean is the same man who took the punishment to make us clean again.

But even so, it's instructive to look at the list, and see how it impacts on each one of us and on our 21<sup>st</sup> century society.

First up, we have evil thoughts. Every outward act of sin follows an inward act of choice, and so every other sin will follow on from this start.

Next on the list is sexual immorality, but so much has been said on this subject already that I want to stress that

it is no worse than the other sins on the list. So let's press on...

Theft. Well, that's a relief. Not many of us are thieves. Unfortunately, the Greeks have two words for thief: the big-league league thief (lestes) – like Barabbas – and the little-league thief (kleptes) – like Judas when he dipped into the money-box. And the word Jesus uses here means the petty thief. That's the mean, deceitful, dishonourable pilferer. The one who pays cash to avoid the tax, the one who doesn't buy a ticket because nobody ever asked him...

Murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, folly. This makes for a very worrying list, not because of the big things, but because of the little things. It's easy not to murder. It's harder not to envy or to be arrogant. And the list is worrying because the little things are listed right there with the big things, so that God doesn't see them in the same way that we do.

You will hear a great many Christians speaking out against many forms of immoral behaviour, and they get lots of publicity for what they are saying, and rightly so. But it's not so often that we hear preachers speaking out against the petty pilferer or the envious or the arrogant. And if I start to do that here this morning, I'll run into trouble from those of you who might say “but that's so different” (which in fact it isn't) and from those of you who will say “well look who's talking” (which you have every right to do, and you'll be right.) While I was preparing this sermon, I had a careful look at the list, and if I am completely honest, I reckon that I only score well on two of them, possibly three.

But because the standard is so high, I'm not sure who will be able to do better. But by the saving power of God through Christ Jesus, I am able to become clean again, and have an opportunity to live a better life through Christ. I don't want to think too much which way my life would have gone if Christ wasn't there to guide me. As I look around at the people I meet in our modern society, I **do** thank God that in so many ways I am not like them, but aware that a prayer such as that does, unfortunately, start to make me seem like one of the Pharisees myself

Anyway, then there was a break in Jesus' ministry. He headed out to the region of Tyre, as far away from Jerusalem as he ever travelled, and even though he tried to keep a low profile, he wasn't able to do so. He was soon reached by a Gentile Syro-Phoenician mother. These days we would say she was Lebanese.

Now, this woman had a daughter, and the daughter had an evil spirit within her. And like any mother whose daughter is unwell, she wanted her daughter to recover, to be made well, to be made whole. We read that she **begged** Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

And that's where Jesus says one of the most extraordinary things in scripture. "First let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." What on earth does he mean?

Well, as a Gentile woman, she was seen by the Jews as being one of the untouchables, one of the people that Jews shouldn't have anything to do with. We see this idea through a lot of scripture: indeed, it's there in a lot of the

gospel narrative too.

And the Jews weren't always very polite about the Gentiles, to say the least. On the other hand, Gentiles haven't always been polite about Jews either...

One term that the Jews used was “dogs”. So maybe when Jesus says what he does “First let the children eat all they want” – he's talking about all the good things that God has given to his own children – the Jews themselves. And he seems to be saying that those good things shouldn't be thrown to the dogs, which means the Gentiles. Yet in the first part of the chapter, Jesus has shown that there will be a transformation and change in the way things happen and he is doing this already by talking to a Gentile woman. But at first it doesn't seem to be going very well. It wasn't good to call someone a dog in Roman times any more than it's good today. When the Romans played dice games, “canis” or “the dog” was the worst possible throw. Today, it's not good news if someone calls you a bitch or a dog.

So our theologians have come to our rescue and explained that this isn't at all what Jesus could possibly have meant, and have explained that he meant “puppy” or “little house dog” or even “doggie” because the Greek translation of Jesus' words used a diminutive, a word like “dad” instead of “father” or “Dave” instead of “David”. But Jesus was almost certainly speaking in Aramaic, which doesn't **have** diminutives at all! So, when Jesus calls someone a dog, that's what he means. Not doggy, not puppy, not anything else.

Well, that doesn't sound so promising for the Lebanese lady, so she says “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs under the

table eat the children's crumbs." This might mean that the Gentile world can benefit from what happens to the Jews, or it might just be an answer to counter what Jesus has said. Over the years Jesus spent quite a bit of time with women who might be described as "a bit of a live-wire" and I'm thinking particularly of the Samaritan woman at the well as I say that.

Well, as it turns out, Jesus liked the intelligent and challenging answer and he said "for such a reply, you may go: the demon has left your daughter" and so it was. An intelligent answer is one that is key: our Christianity and our Saviour rejoice in intelligent debate, whatever may be the perception elsewhere. The transformation that Christ has produced in our history is beyond anything else we have seen, and more importantly, the transformation that we can see in the lives of ourselves and other Christians is evidence in itself of Christ and his saving power.

As we come to communion, let's remember that in the everyday symbols of bread and wine, we have a great reminder of Christ's death and resurrection and the opportunity for a transforming change in the lives of each of us.