

Sunday 1st September 2024 Trinity 14; Benefice BCP Holy Communion Stonegrave.

Some words from today's Gospel, "*This people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me*".

Are you religious? Or are you on a spiritual journey of transformation as a child of God? Our two readings today speak about being 'religious'. In his letter James speaks of the change of attitudes and actions that springs from God, 'the Father of Lights' as gifts from His Spirit. He says to be doers of the word, not merely hearers. In other words, people who have been redeemed and transformed and continue to be so from the inside out.

If we allow, God takes us and keeps us on that journey of transformation. Part of that might be doing religious things; church, worship, prayer, giving - but these should not just be things we do but should be an outward indication of what is going on in our spirit. One of the greatest dangers that faces us is ending up being religious and not spiritual. Religiosity is often mistaken for spirituality, but there is a world of difference between the two. The former comes from human motivation, the latter is a divine gift. In the Jewish world the Law sought to make people religious, but not necessarily spiritual, because it was a practise taken up with the external, visible things. Spirituality though is primarily a matter of the heart, Jesus tells us warns us that there will be many who have a veneer of godliness but do not know God - in other words, they will be religious, but not spiritual. They will go to meetings, pray, and read the Bible daily but they will still seek honour for themselves and not be open to spiritual transformation.

So, what about our religious practise? Sometimes I have heard it said that our Liturgy is boring, always the same, is

dull and uninspiring, that is doesn't speak to or have meaning or relevance to the younger generation or visitors. That might be the case if we consider our liturgy as just a religious practise and nothing more. Yes, the structure might be the same, but that structure should evoke and renew something within us each time we participate in it. It should never make us think it was the same as last week or last month. If it does, maybe we are getting stuck in the religious practise rather than being open to the Spirit working through that practise, liturgy, and tradition on that day. Each time I preside at the Eucharist I don't think I am going through the motions and it is just 'same old', it always feels like a new experience to me even though I am doing something I have done many times before using the same words and actions because the Spirit works in the now, the moment, the present, transforming and inspiring anew, evoking a sense that speaks to all in that moment if they are open to it.

Just being religious though suggests fixed practises that restrict and confine, cause judgemental attitudes and bigotry, like the Pharisees in the Gospel who were legalistic, concerned only with processes and rules, not the spiritual transformation of their lives. That attitude continues today. I met someone in hospital a couple of weeks ago who belongs to a section of the Church of England that not only, rejects receiving the sacrament from a woman, but he also refused to receive it from me because I was not part of his group. I was once told that if I didn't speak in tongues, I was not a proper Christian. A minister once said to me she went to lead a service and was told, 'we don't do that Holy Spirit nonsense here!' Somebody told me once that she irons the 'fair linen' for the altar for Communion for at least three hours each week!

Of course, we may do things that express our devotion but in themselves alone those actions may become just a

religious act not something where we encounter God's Spirit. The attitude of mind that thinks, "What can I do to show how religious I am?", leads to religiosity. On the other hand, the attitude that thinks, "What can I do to serve the Lord that only He knows?", will lead to true spirituality.

This spirituality is life force, is free flowing, something that is constantly evolving, that brings new ideas and ancient paths together. It's about a faith that works not only for us but for the whole messy, wide, beautiful world, deeply centred in the Good News of Jesus, that celebrates diversity, is naturally sacramental, ecumenical, embodied, generous, spirit-filled, truthful, and rooted in the unconditional, never-ending love of God.

This is the life James explains in the Epistle today and Jesus says must come from the heart, a religion that is not religiosity but is an outward expression of this spiritual transformation that evolves every day in our lives.

What is more important to you today, being religious or being carried by the love of God? Do you just want to do things to demonstrate to others how devout you are, or do you want to change from the inside out and serve our Lord? Do you want to reach the end of your life with the same beliefs and practises you had at the beginning, or do you want to be open to having those beliefs and practises renewed day by day? Because if we don't want to change and evolve over our lifetime, then are we really paying attention to the invitation of the Holy Spirit to transform and lead us each day on a wonderful journey of discovery and hope?

Thanks be to God. Amen.