

Sunday 6th November 2022

Mark 7:1-16

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Brightons Parish Church

Sermon keypoints:

- Tradition helps to ground us and also leads to:
 - Prejudices
 - Priorities
 - Misuse
 - Misunderstanding
- We need discernment on what to retain and what to change

Beautifully sung. A great prayer for all of us. And before we think about the theme for this morning's service, just let us come before God in prayer:

Our loving Heavenly Father, we come into Your presence this morning and, in so doing, we thank You for the privilege of being here. You are the one who created us, the one who created the world in which we live and move and have our being, You are the one who is all-powerful and yet, You have made it possible for us to come into Your presence. As we have just heard, there are many challenges within our world and sometimes we can be so discouraged, so disheartened, so dispirited by all that we see and hear, we seem to lurch from one crisis to another so, frequently, that the word perma-crisis has entered into our dictionaries. We feel our own weaknesses, the frailties of our minds and bodies, the transience of what is around us. We face so many challenges through our faith and we often falter and feel that we fail. Strengthen us, we pray, and renew a right spirit within us. We ask You, by Your Holy Spirit, to create within us a heart for worship, a heart that is glad to be open to You and not a heart which desires, constantly, its own comfort zone. It's all too easy for our worship to become a war and blanket around us and for us to shut out the real needs. Help us not to fall into that trap and, as our hearts are opened, we ask that we may have a renewed vision of You, our God, as You reach down to us and the person of Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ made real to us through Your Spirit. He walked this earth before our time. He experienced the pains and aches of human existence yet, He did so gladly, setting before us a divine example and opening for us a new and living way into Your presence. We ask that we may meet Him here this morning and now we ask you to forgive our sins. Close in with Your Word, for we ask these things in Jesus. name and for His sake. Amen.

There's a tradition, isn't there, that The Guild at Brightons Church has a special Sunday every year. Have you noticed? We've been here before. We've been at The Guild Sunday and today we're observing that tradition. By now I think you've worked out what the T-word is for today, it is the word 'tradition'. It's great to be made aware of the work of The Guild and to be reminded that The Guild has changed with time. We think, perhaps, as Maggie said, that it's something very old and fixed and it's just a certain sector of the church that come along dutifully and do various things that are not perhaps relevant to this world. Well, if that's the way we've been thinking, we've been well instructed this morning. When I first heard of The Guild it was the Woman's Guild and it dropped that bit of the name. Now that was a big change and I'm sure it didn't come easily, there would have been voices for and voices against because that's the way we handle the T-word, tradition. Yes, that's how it is but now it's just The Guild and men

can come too. Men can come along. Now, I don't exactly see a rush on the part of men here and, I would have to say, that I am as guilty as anyone else. But a week ago, I went along to The Guild and I was very encouraged, inspired and I had a spring in my step as a result of being there.

When I heard about the projects, so interesting, and one of them in particular, they're both equally worthy, but one I thought 'How wonderful', Unida. Why did I think that? I thought that because I spent my working life in higher education, and third level education, and to those of us in this country it comes so easily as Elspeth Reid reminded us on that Monday evening. We have, in Brazil, a tradition, keyword again, where women are just kept in a corner, where they are despised and so often injured and one of the cities where this is, the city where this has been set up has a very high murder rate of women and Unida is trying to change tradition, trying to give people a chance and, particularly, to give women a chance. We struggled with that one in our own society much earlier on, still struggle with it, but, in places like Brazil, there are even more challenges. So, tradition is on the move. The Guild is on the move and the way we handle things in this world, that's on the move as well and that's great.

Tradition then, what is it? I have to confess that when I thought of this sermon my first idea was 'I don't know what tradition is.' It's such a difficult word to define and, funnily enough, we all think we know what tradition is. That's the problem. We've all got our traditions which we hold dear and yet, if I asked you to define tradition so that it was convincing and all-embracing and real, I wonder what we would arrive at, the definition of tradition.

I was brought up in the islands, as some of you already know, and I often talk about my background there, I was brought up within Gaelic tradition. I was a Gaelic speaker first and foremost and the first sermon I ever preached was in Gaelic within a Gaelic context, and I learned pretty quickly that there were traditions associated with Gaelic tradition wee ones inside the big one and that I had to be very careful if I wasn't right about this or that I might feel are we tug here and there, and after I would finish the service somebody would say 'Oh, you didn't quite do that the right way.' and I learned the Gaelic way of doing a service. And then I moved on to doing it the English and Scottish way. Some of us know Gaelic tradition in another way, the songs, the music, the stories, the tales and they're all wrapped up in that word 'tradition'. But then we can move to Scottish tradition, Irish tradition, English tradition, Welsh tradition, British tradition. We can have our own traditions. Remember, remember the 5th of November, which was just last night with all its explosions and bangs. And that's another tradition.

But then, of course, we have church tradition and that is a difficult word as well, isn't it? We can talk about what the Church of Scotland does traditionally and we can talk about what the church in Scotland does traditionally and it's also variable and within each individual building, each individual church. We have our own wee traditions, don't we? And what are they? There are ways of doing things. We've done them down the years and probably they've held us steady. Tradition does that. Sometimes some would say it holds us too steady and we don't move as we ought but, to be honest, some of our

traditions change gradually, so gradually that we hardly notice others are harder to accept but eventually we get around to accepting the change. The changes are difficult. I remember when they were rows going on and whether we should address God as 'Thou' and not. We had that one. We then had difficulties with the move from the King James Bible to the New International and, in the course of time, the New International changed as well, the text moved on to be more inclusive.

And so, change comes. Traditions change and sometimes we don't notice and sometimes we get a jerk. Suddenly we've got to change our ways. Something big comes along. Didn't Covid do that for us, moved us along, gave us a great bump and we had to go over to new methods, new ways of reaching out because we couldn't meet within the walls. It was a strange time and yet we've learned a few things through that. Doing church is different now. As I speak to you, others are watching me and this live stream is taking this message far beyond this church and I'm not aware of it. It doesn't bother me in the least, and nobody here is very much aware of it either, but it has come and it too has become part of what the tradition is. It has moved in and we are grateful for it. There's an expanded view of what the church actually is and I think Covid did for some of us to think along these lines.

No, I have been asked to speak on tradition because of a book that Scott recommended to us. It is The Anatomy of a Revived Church by Tom Rainer. And, in that book, in one of its chapters Tom Rainer looks at tradition in the church. It's very interesting what he sees as tradition which is difficult to manage.

Worship music and styles, possibly, yes.

Order of worship services, well we run to a certain order don't we. But, even today's, one has been moved about. Nobody noticed.

The times of worship services, we can some of us know churches which meet at midday, others which meet in the afternoon and so on. But, if you move them, sometimes there's quite a bit of friction.

The role of the pastor. Well, I'll leave that one to the pastor. I don't think I would want to say too much of that.

About that the role of committees, ministry and programs.

Church buildings, rooms.

In church business, meeting staff positions.

Well, there they are. And recently we ourselves have been asked to think about the role of children in the church and matters pertaining to communion. And I'm quite sure we've all had our wee thoughts about this in terms of 'T' tradition haven't we? If we're really honest, we have, I have and this is what goes on.

And, of course, round about us Presbytery changes. There was a time when every church had its Parish, every Parish had its church then amalgamations took place, the world began to move in other directions and that process is still going on, making us feel very uncomfortable at times, wondering what's around the next corner. We're human and tradition sometimes helps to ground us, keeps us safe, we can hold on to it, solid. And then things, that's what we think, and then it begins to change. Now, I could spend

this sermon digging into the debates. I'm not going to do that. I want us to dig into God's Word and see what happens when Jesus talks about tradition. That's what's important for us today and the passage that we read together from Mark's Gospel highlights this.

I was reading through Mark's gospel when I suddenly realized that I had committed myself to talking about tradition and, somehow, it had just moved away, as tradition does, out of my brain, and then Scott reminded me and I thought 'Where will I get something about tradition?' and I was reading Mark's Gospel, that very place, that very chapter that we've read here this morning, and there's a wonderful example of Jesus taking on tradition, graciously, firmly, and not without a touch of dry humor which Jesus was very good at.

He encounters the Pharisees and the way they see the world. Now, I want to analyze this very briefly using two P's and two M's so, if you come back to the passage that we read, that Sandra read so beautifully for us, chapter 7 of Mark's Gospel we'll work it out and we'll use this to guide us through our attitudes to tradition.

So, the two P's first of all. What do we see here? We see Prejudices, that's the first thing. We note this is all about prejudices. The Pharisees are engaged in ceremonial washing it's not about this, not about doing that, or whatever else you do, it's about ceremonial washing and the Pharisees are keeping a close eye on the disciples to see what they're going to do. They're washing their various items. They're going at it in the way that is right for them and let's remember all that. Let's be fair to Pharisees, sometimes, I think, we're not all that fair, they're doing the right thing by their book and they were very good at that and sometimes we would do well to take a leaf out of their book.. So, Jesus handles them very wisely. They want to see if the disciples somehow step out of line, and they do. 'Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with unclean hands?' And tradition can lead us into criticism of other people and it's not helpful sometimes. As I've said, I was brought up in the highlands, I was brought up entirely where we had a fairly open approach to the faith. My father was a Baptist Minister and he preached every Sunday morning in Gaelic in the Baptist Church but he also helped the Church of Scotland whenever there was a vacancy, whenever there was difficulty, my father stepped into the bridge. And for us there is a continuum between the Baptist movement and the Church of Scotland one which, I suppose, represents to this day. But if I went to the northern highlands I might find things that are a little different, and some denominations like to attack the others, they like to run down the alternative denomination, point out its faults, its failings. The Presbyterian Church may just point to the failures of the Free Church, and the Free Church may just point to the failures of the Church of Scotland. It happens occasionally, believe me, in the highlands and often it's through because we've got our own way of doing things. Stand to praise, sit to sing. That sort of thing happens. But then there are doctrinal issues as well. Not doing it the right way. Westminster Confession. Are we close to that, is that church further away from it than our than our way of doing it. And very easily we have prejudices.

Jesus challenges that by asking the Pharisees about their Priorities. And that's the second P. Jesus counters the Pharisees complaint with the words 'You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men' or, as the newer version says 'onto human traditions' so it's all inclusive, it's not just male that's female as well, as with the Woman's Guild. And so, we have to ask ourselves what is really important in being church? Are we here to fight denominational battles? I think of what we are here to do, as I often have these challenges with the Church of Scotland. What am I here to do? Support the Church of Scotland? What is it we're here to do? We are here to proclaim the Gospel as a living community. That's what we are here to do. 'You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men (human traditions).' It's so easy to do. I've seen so many flash points along the line because priorities are not honored as they ought to be. When there's to be physical change in a church, move a pew, anything, and you can often spark just a little debate, just a little, because great grandfather endowed that pew and great-grandmother sat on it for X number of years. We don't remember how long but she did so you mustn't move the pew. And so, it goes on, and the most divisive disputes that I've encountered in the time are often about material things, try moving something that's material. People will react in a way that they might not react if you're moving spiritual things. That's the irony. Priorities - sort them out. Our more inclusive concept of church demands change, very often, to bring in people who have needs, difficulties, challenges, that we don't necessarily have but the inclusivity of the Christian Gospel demands a response.

Now, how about the two M's? We've done two P's and we've not done two M's.

The first of the two M's is Misuse. Jesus points out to the Pharisees that they have ways that they can bend tradition and they do it in the area of family responsibility. If they call something Corban i.e., devoted to God, then they don't need to devote it to looking after their parents. And tradition can have ways of cleverly getting out, getting us out of difficulties, responsibilities we have. We appeal to tradition all around so we don't do it. I do it this way, and it is safer doing it that way so, I'm not going to get involved. I know it because I'm the chief sinner in that respect. that's going on in my own head so often. Not quite the way I would do it so I'll keep away. And so, Jesus challenges this mindset, this excuse for inactivity and I would plead guilty to it even in today's Church. If we don't like what the church is doing, why not get involved and make it better? Surely that's the way to go rather than to say 'Oh, my tradition is the one that's important and if they don't do it. well, out.' Not a good way to go.

And the second 'M', misunderstanding. Jesus tackles that beautifully in terms of the externals. He says it's not what goes into you that's going to make you unclean, it's what comes out of you. And we need to remember that tradition is often an external matter. What really matters is the internal one. Where are we going spiritually? That's the issue, certainly the issue for me. And it's easy to do the tick on tradition isn't it? Done that one, done that one, okay. Externals. But how are we in here? What's our relationship to God? What's our relationship to the one who created us? Where do we put Him? In a pew or high above us, exalted and glorified? I love the little verse that's actually omitted in there, in the translation we read from. 'If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear.' I'm

often challenged by that because sometimes, we can hear things and not hear them. We can be very selectively deaf. 'If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.' And in that spirit, we have to think about tradition. Is it the be-all and end-all or is there a greater, a better calling.

I've been in so many different churches. They all do things differently but the thing I rejoice in the fact that I can talk to you about Jesus and what He means and says and does to this moment. That's what's important.

Warnings though. We must never assume that tradition is automatically bad and that it has to be broken simply because it is tradition. I know people and for them the very word tradition is like a red rag to a bull. Whoom, they're at it! and they want to change it – Wheech!. We didn't mention it in case there's a huge reaction but remember folks, changing tradition and substituting something untraditional in its place is not necessarily a good thing. There's no silver bullet that we can just invoke and fire as Brent Haywood reminded us a couple of weeks ago. Novelty and newness may be part of the answer. It often is because we have to match the needs of society with the ways we're working, and we have to change our ways. But novelty is not the remedy. It can only ever be part of it. We have to get our priorities right.

And, above all, we're back to the 'D' word. We had the 'T' word, tradition and we've now got back to the 'D' word which we heard a few times in the course of this year's sermons. What is the word? Discernment. We have to be so careful what we're going to put away, what we're going to keep. When we were renovating the house in Tíree my daughter was in charge and when we were doing the needful, I would be asked 'Dad, what are we going to do with this? Are we going to keep it or are we going to throw it out? and nine times out of ten I would say 'Mach!' in Gaelic which is the word for 'out'. But then, there were things that we had to keep and I'm glad we kept them. Discernment was needed.

And so, my dear friends, that's tradition. We live with it all the time. We make it, we then think it's been there since Noah was a boy, and it hasn't. And we need to be flexible in our approach to the world that we live in. Remember, the church's mission is to the world, not to itself. Our mission in Brightons is out there and it's so important that we think in these terms. The Guild shows us the way. They've been changing the traditions quietly, beautifully, so quietly and nicely, that some of us haven't noticed and we need to notice, because they're exemplary in that way.

Amen, and may the Lord bless to us these few reflections on the theme of tradition.