

TJW, HT, 26.7.09, 9.15am & 11am,

Matthew 15.1-20

This morning we're going to hear Jesus tell us what our biggest problem is.

Jesus is divine - he's God himself - he's our creator - so we're going need to listen, aren't we, to his diagnosis of our biggest problem. He's got the wisdom and the authority to tell us how it really is.

Let's not beat around the bush. **Our biggest problem, says Jesus - yours and mine - is our heart. Our nature.**

Let's come at the issue this way. Just about everyone who comes to church is looking for something.

Some people come looking to get some kind of experience of God, that will see them through the coming week.

Others come because they want to leave behind a bad week that they've just had, and have it washed away from them by God.

Still others come to church because they think of church as an institution stands for something that's important to them that they fear is being lost - maybe they're worried about what they see as the loss of a Christian heritage in this country, or of moral values that they hold dear but their grandchildren don't.

If you're fairly new to Holy Trinity, you probably know very well why you're here.

If you've been coming here for years and years, you might have to think hard about why it is that you come here - but for all of us there will be some deep reason, some real reason why we come.

And do you see that the reason you're really here is a very good way of revealing what you think your biggest problem is.

If you're here to get a good feeling of an experience with God to take with you into next week - that tells you that you think your biggest problem is a lack in your feelings - you lack a feeling of God in your life, or you don't feel good about yourself.

If you're here because you want to be part of something that stands for moral principles and Christian heritage - that tells you that you think your biggest problem isn't actually your problem - it's the problems you see in other people in our society that really bother you.

But when you're a patient with a disease, and you're sitting with the world-expert doctor, it's not very sensible to walk in and tell him what you think is wrong with you. You keep quiet, and listen while he gives you his expert diagnosis.

And we need to listen to Jesus Christ and let him tell us what's really wrong with us. That's what he does here in his Word, the Bible.

His diagnosis is that our biggest problem is a heart condition - not a physical one, of course, but a spiritual one.

Our biggest problem is our heart in the sense that we speak of the 'heart' as meaning 'the real me' - my nature. So our biggest

problem, according to Jesus, goes as deep as who we really are - our real selves.

In the section of Matthew's Gospel that was read to us, that's the one big thing that God is telling us. So this morning I want us to stick with it and not get lost distracted by following lots of side-issues.

So let's see what provoked Jesus to give us the devastating diagnosis about ourselves. I would recommend opening the Bible to Matthew chapter 15.

Jesus says the big thing here twice. Look first at verse 10 [READ verses 10-11]. And now verse 15 [READ verses 15-20].

Jesus had been challenged by a group of Jewish religious leaders - you can see that right at the beginning of chapter 15 [READ verses 1-2].

These were people who took the Old Testament laws very seriously. They took them so seriously that they expanded them, and added additional rules to make sure that they didn't come close to breaking Old Testament laws - like someone who never drives above 20 in a 30 mile-an-hour street, to make sure he gets nowhere near breaking the law.

Here, the issue that's bothering the Pharisees is that Jesus and his disciples didn't always give their hands a thorough washing before they ate.

Now this isn't about hygiene - these people are not the 'swine flu inspection squad', making sure that Jesus isn't passing on any germs. This is about religious ritual. It's about washing your body as a symbol of your desire to be spiritually and morally clean before God.

In a couple of places the Old Testament laws said that certain people, such as the priests, should wash their hands as a religious ritual on certain occasions. These Pharisees were so keen to uphold that law that they began to instruct everyone to do it.

And of course part and parcel of that was that they were really bothered if anyone ate any of the foods which the Old Testament said made you unclean before God - such as pork.

They know that Jesus is teaching people about God, so they can't understand why he seems to be more free and easy about all of this than they are.

And with his answer to them, Jesus blows apart their whole way of looking at things.

He says: It's not what you put into your mouth that makes you unclean. Because what you put into your mouth just goes into your stomach. And actually the end of verse 17 in our church Bibles is a bit of a prissy translation. What it literally says is: what you put into your mouth goes into your stomach and then goes down the toilet.

Jesus goes on: what makes you unclean before God - what really gets in the way of your relationship with God - what really provokes God's wrath against humanity - is what comes out of you: evil thoughts, sexual immorality, lying, slandering of others.

And none of us can go a single day without some of that stuff coming out of us.

Even if you try really hard to be good all day, you'll lie in bed at night and you'll congratulate yourself for having behaved so much better than everyone else - and that's pride, and it's an evil thought.

So our biggest problem before God is not that I'm basically OK but I commit the odd occasional sin.

We often think like that. We think: "There are some bad people in the world, but I'm pretty reasonable - except of course when people annoy me, or I'm stressed."

But our biggest problem before God is ourselves - our nature, our heart.

And neither is our biggest problem before God is our environment.

In our culture we are very focused on passing the blame. We're encouraged to think that when selfish thoughts and actions come out of me it's not really me, it's not really my fault. It's because of my upbringing - or because of all these annoying people around me - or because of my genes.

One of the most destructive things our culture gives us is a victim mentality, that takes away our responsibility.

Now of course we're shaped by all these things around us. But they don't control us. We are responsible for ourselves before God.

Our biggest problem before God is not other people - not our background - not our biology.

Our biggest problem before God is our heart - our nature.

In ourselves - as the people we are - we are not acceptable before God.

We are factories of uncleanness before God, and the factory runs 24/7. It's like a polluted spring that just keeps welling up inside you however hard you try to suppress it.

This is the source in the Bible of what theologians have called the doctrine of 'original sin'. It's the truth that our big problem is not so much the actual sins we commit; it's deeper than that - it's the sinfulness that's already in our nature when we're born. That doctrine is right here in Jesus' own words.

Someone may hear this and say, "I feel bad enough about myself already, and this kind of teaching just makes it worse."

But look - if the truth is bad - and Jesus here says it is - we need to hear it.

If your car is unroadworthy and dangerous, you don't really want the garage to turn a blind eye and wave it through its MOT. You need to know the truth.

And accepting this truth is vital to finding joy and forgiveness and peace with God. You can't know the joy of God's forgiveness unless you are deeply convinced that you need God to forgive you as you are.

This has often been called the 'conviction of sin'. Some people find themselves convicted of their own sin as their first spiritual step - a deep experience that leads them to Christ as their saviour. I've seen that happen recently in someone.

Others give themselves to Christ as their Lord, and a deep conviction of their sin and their need for him as saviour only grows over time.

Recently I've seen someone only feel their sinfulness really deeply several years after they turned to Christ.

When it happens doesn't matter. The key thing is: every follower of Christ must grow to have a deep conviction of what Jesus says here:

My sinfulness is profound. My sin is not the odd bad thing I do. Sin is in my heart, in my nature. It's as deep in me as it could possibly be.

Now, here's a question: How does a Christian know if they've really accepted this truth for themselves?

Try this. When you hear of bad stuff that other people have done, is your gut-reaction: "How dare they. I'd never do that. I'd never add a little bit to my expenses they way they've done. I'd never say hurtful things like that."

Or is your gut-reaction: "In their shoes, I could easily have done the same thing - because I know the truth about my own heart." That's the person who's learned the truth of what Jesus says here.

Our problem before God is us - our nature.

So do you see that this means that **a good dose of religion and moral effort will not solve our problem.**

That's the big mistake the Pharisees were making. They knew people were sinners, and they thought that sticking to all these religious rules and moral codes acted like a fence - that stopped people falling into sin too badly, and God would be OK with that.

But you see, don't you, that even a really big dose of religion and moral effort can't change our hearts. It can't put a stop to the sinfulness that wells up from our nature.

A couple of years ago I had tonsillitis that came and went all summer.

The back of my throat looked red raw, and at times even drinking water was painful.

If I sucked an antiseptic pastille, it soothed it a little for about two minutes, and then the pain came roaring back.

What I needed was some top-strength antibiotics to root out the infection.

Do you see that any religion or moral effort that we try out before God to make ourselves better was like me sucking a throat pastille.

It glosses over the underlying problem for a minute or two, but it can't really deal with it.

But the idea that a bit of religion and a bit of trying to be good will sort us out with God - that idea will always be attractive.

It's attractive because it tells us that we can sort out our problem with God ourselves - and we like that idea, don't we, that we can do it ourselves.

But we see here in Matthew 15 how dangerous this idea really is.

And there are three dangers here.

First, it leads to hypocrisy. Jesus starts by showing the Pharisees how their rules end up leading people away from God, not to God.

They had a rule that said that someone could declare that all their money would go to the temple funds when they died - as a way of honouring God. And that meant that they didn't have to use any of their money to support their elderly parents - because it was all promised to the temple. So, says Jesus - you've invented a rule which ends up breaking the Ten Commandments, which tell you to

honour your father and mother. Verse 7: 'You hypocrites', he says to them.

The first danger is hypocrisy. The second danger is that anyone who teaches this is facing God's judgment. Look at verse 12 [READ verses 12-13].

That means that any Christian leader who basically teaches you that your sin isn't so deep - that all you've got to do is be a bit less materialistic, and bit nicer to others, and a bit more religious - that's a leader who is in big trouble with God. Don't listen to them.

Jesus isn't worried about offending religious leaders who teach that message.

And the final danger of this is in the next verse - verse 14 [READ]. Don't follow that kind of teaching. It leads you away from God towards the destruction of hell and judgment.

Because our big problem is our heart, no amount of religion or trying to sort out your behaviour can solve it.

We don't need lessons in morality. What we need first is someone who can do heart surgery on us - someone who can change our nature.

This passage doesn't say explicitly how that happens - but of course Jesus is going to say that he's the only one who can do that for us.

You probably do know why you're really here today.

If you wouldn't call yourself a committed Christian, please hear this message loud and clear. What you need is someone who can forgive

who you are, and begin to change your heart. The only one who can do that is Jesus. Anything else is like trying to use a sticking-plaster to heal a broken leg.

And for those many of us who are committed Christians. Don't ever tire of remembering how profound our sinfulness is. It comes right out of our hearts. Because only then will your joy in your forgiveness in Christ be deep. And only then will you live for him by relying on his grace and his Spirit changing your heart, instead of pointlessly trying to change yourself just by changing your behaviour.