

Koinonia-Fellowship D

Getting practical in our devotion.

August 2021

James 1:17-27

17 Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. 18 In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. 19 You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20 for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. 21 Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. 22 But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. 23 For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; 24 for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 25 But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act--they will be blessed in their doing. 26 If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

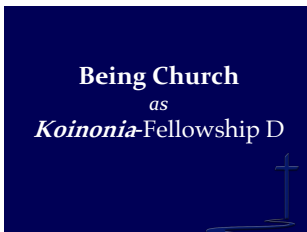
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

7:1 Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, 2 they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. 3 (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 4 and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) 5 So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" 6 He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; 7 in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' 8 You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

14 Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: 15 there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."

7:21 For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, 22 adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. 23 All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

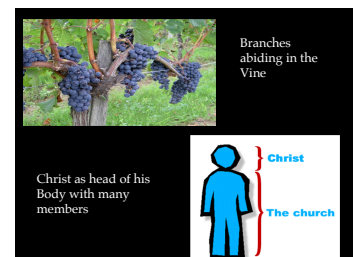
Introduction



This our 4th talk on *Koinonia-Fellowship* and my first preach on Zoom in over 9 months.

In this series so far we have so far looked at:

- 1) Understanding Church through the term '*koinonia-fellowship*' which is all about sharing a common life and spirituality in Christ that links us more profoundly than if we share a mother and father.
- 2) We looked at Jesus' picture of the vine and branches and Paul's image of the head and body as illustrations of *koinonia-fellowship*.





- 3) We have briefly explored how this is expressed, affirmed and celebrated in the way Jesus provided for in sharing bread and wine representing him as our common life.

- 4) Two weeks ago I got us thinking concretely about where this *koinonia*-fellowship might be located and where God was positioned in this? My conclusion was that God wants to be actively 'among' us, in our midst and that God's desire is more for our corporate unity in Christ than for our individual holiness as heard in Jesus' prayer: "Father may they be one that world may believe you sent me." This prayer is all about *koinonia*-fellowship. A church weak here is a weak church!



If you missed any of these 3 previous messages, both texts and audios are available on the St Matthew's Church Website.

As St Paul and St James so often do in their letters, I am now going to cross a bridge entitled, 'Therefore' to talk about how we should thus live *koinonia*-fellowship in consequence of what has been set out so far. So, what changes?

Text and Development

So today as it happens, the Revised Common Lectionary brought us relevant readings from Jesus and James. Jesus is our Lord and James a close interpreter of him. They both have something to say about how we speak, or what comes out of our mouths as brewed in our hearts.

In Mark chapter 7 Jesus says:

¹⁵ there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."

²¹ For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²² adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

And from James chapter 1:

¹⁹ You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰ for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.

²⁶ If any think they are religious ('*pious*'), and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion ('*piety*') is worthless.

Jesus and his apostle James are very clear. In their context many thought holiness or godliness was determined by what you took in as if unholiness or defilement were somehow absorbed by touching dirty things the way we think of infection.¹ Jesus disagrees with that understanding and says, "No - defilement is not determined by what you eat, drink or touch but by what you say and do." It's about outflow, not intake. This was revolutionary.

James reflects a world where people who were religious heavyweights thought a big angry mouth was a valid part of religion as God wanted so self-righteous big mouths out the boot in.

¹ Charles Taylor described this as the sense of 'porous self' as opposed to a 'buffered self'.

Now let's pick this up with what we have already considered in spatial terms:

Q: Where does this defilement actually happen?

When an angry religious big-mouth claiming to bring God's righteousness deceives their heart with an angry mouth – where does that happen?

When someone brings up defilement from their heart as Jesus describes, where does that happen?

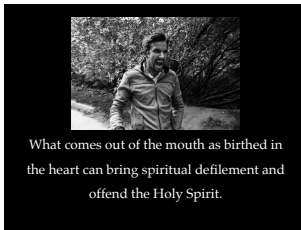
A: It happens right in front of the speaker in the social space be that in a room or in the virtual space of an online link such as we have here now.

That is the same space we have pointed to as where God wants to be. It's the shared location of *koinonia*-fellowship.



So to make it graphic in terms already used, the space in which the precious dove of the Holy Spirit wants to be among us so we abide in *her* presence is filled with the raucous racket and excrement of religious pigeons making a mess as they vent their hearts and drive away the dove.

The Big Point:



What comes out of the mouth as birthed in the heart can bring spiritual defilement and offend the Holy Spirit, damaging *koinonia*-fellowship

And Jesus Wept!

This is typical of how The Jesus Way in Christianity brings spirituality and ethics together when other faiths or religions do not. There is no dualism or sacred-secular divide we can hide behind or play with as people are prone to do in human religions. Our life in God relates to our life with people, and to be holy and righteous they need to align.

Another thought about the space where all this happens:

When Jesus first appears in Mark 1:15 and speaks his opening words:

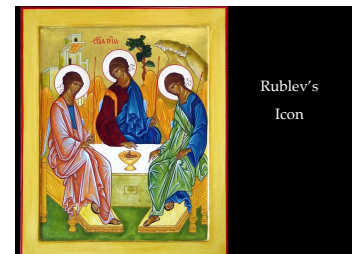
“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe in the gospel.”

We will come back to ‘repent and believe’ later but for now I note the way Jesus says the “Kingdom of God is within your hand’s reach”. That’s about half a meter for the average person which seems to put it in the same space as where we speak out our heart through our mouths.

Jesus says more about this in Luke 17:

²¹ nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the Kingdom of God is in the midst of you.”

That close-at-hand space is our social or ‘in-between’ space where we may behold the Kingdom of God among us. It’s the space where we engage, speak out our hearts and enjoy *koinonia*-fellowship. That what we celebrate in Communion and is depicted of the Trinity in Rublev’s Icon. It’s the shared space of God we are invited into.



So far this has all by way of introduction so let's get to the ‘therefore’.

Karl Barth famously said that to preach well we need to,
 “Read the Bible in one hand and the Newspaper in the other.”
 The newspaper represents the culture and events of today.

Thus far we have been reading the scriptures.

Now I am going to read the local culture of our nation, of St Matthews and some more:
 Joining the dots with a clear ‘Therefore’ should then be really straightforward - I hope!

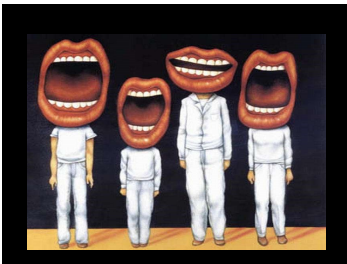


My reading of the local culture is very influenced by the fact that 9 months ago, we arrived back in A/NZ after 18.5 years away. We came back to find many of the goal-posts had moved -at least as seemed to us- and realised we had changed too. So the first months were full of fresh impressions and noticing things.²

So when we notice something curious we ask whether these are all typical A/NZ, South Island, Dunedin or St Matthews?

Case #1

We noticed this week in lockdown’s season of discontent something play out in Auckland at the other end of the country. A large gathering of the Samoan AOG Church held just prior to lockdown was identified as a major spreader event.



Suddenly the air erupted with many big mouths in top gear venting vitriol against the Samoan Community.

Not nice!

Aotearoa-New Zealand is not a spiritual *koinonia*-fellowship but we may still recognise the angry unbridled tongues letting slip their thin covid kindness to vent what was in their hearts – latent racism? I have been living in and around European nations with considerable ethnic tensions and I am not used to hearing this sort of thing so I noticed. I see it as defiling of the nation. Happily our national leadership recognises this -including Ashley Bloomfield the Director General of Health who spoke against it.

That’s big bad Auckland – right? And we are South Island, Dunedin! *Hmmm?*
 Let me now read some very local culture.

In April we came to live in Dunedin based here in St Matthew’s Church. From the get-go something kept happening that we were not used to, namely: many people, talked to us about other people. Now this is sometimes necessary but I have heard decades worth of background involving low points in

² I can clearly relate one way this worked when we first arrived in the Netherlands in 2002. What struck me during the first months there was how every building smelt distinctive to me with altogether new smells, probably reflecting building materials and cleaning products. This lasted a month or so and then I become ‘habituated’. I had registered the smells but because they did not change they became the standard background air I breathed and lived in. Then, coming the other way whenever I came back to NZ I was struck by how clean the night air was but also how foul the petrol exhaust fumes were compared to Europe – quite ironic! After nine months that has still not settled or habituated.

the lives of many people from others without my asking about it. A lot of what we heard was not that positive. This got me wondering.

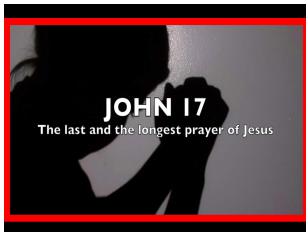
And it went further:

As we nudged into the Diocese of Dunedin, I got to hear all manner of things about people I'd only briefly met. A few weeks ago I related this to Bishop Steven as he is also a person in transition having come back from England just four years ago. Everyone speaks very well of Bishop Steve but it generally stops there with dirt available on most everyone else!

Q: So I have been wondering, what is the local culture?

A: My conclusion is that in this country -and in this church- people consider it normal to relate past histories of others complete with embarrassing details, sometimes implying judgement or even putting in the boot in as well.

I think Jesus and James would consider this as 'defiling'. It's what Paul describes as 'gossip and slander.'³ The Bible speaks against it in many places. As we have heard from James, it does not bring about God's righteousness and leaves the smell of pigeon poo as detested by doves!



When it happens nationally it harms the 'Team of 5 Million'.
When it happens in the Church it damages the unity Jesus prayed for and unravels the fabric of *koinonia*-fellowship delicately woven by the Holy Spirit amongst and amidst the children of God in Christ.

So this willingness or accepted tendency to speak negatively about others, to sometimes speak judgement, or even heap condemnation on others in their absence, is as defiling and welcome as dog poo under your shoe. *You know what I mean?*

Jacinda Ardern tries to soften this in the wider culture by saying, "Be kind!". Meanwhile, today we have the clear words of Jesus and developed message of James to spell it out so much more for us as spiritual people wanting to maintain and enhance the spiritual fellowship of St Matthew's church. Change here could be transforming within and beyond!

Application

Q: So how do we stop this among us and in our midst? Might we consider:

- House Rules?
- Vestry Policy?
- A Diocesan Canon or two?
- Fines for infringements?

A: The most basic answer comes from the first words of Jesus read before from Mark 1:15

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand,
repent and believe in the gospel."

If you want to embrace the Kingdom or 'Reign of God' in this regard within your personal space -those 18 inches or half meter we think of as 'ours'- then 'Repent and Believe'.

"The time is fulfilled, and the
kingdom of God is at hand,
repent and believe in the
gospel."

Mark 1:15

³ref: Romans 1:29, 2 Corinthians 12:20 , 1Timothy 5:13

Stop doing what is bad -even if culturally normal, resolve to change your mind's way of thinking, reset your standards, change your heart's orientation. Set a new personal policy to transform your way, and then trust God, obey, stand firm and hold fast.

If what I have said today is a sound reading of both scripture and culture as lived, let's stop talking about others in any negative or down-putting manner. Just stop. *Kick the habit!*
Then walk with God in this, seek his guidance, encouragement and help.

Q: Why?

A: Because we want to welcome the Holy Spirit in our midst – Right?

This is the 'repent and believe muscle', we need to exercise frequently and often. It is the way to baptism and the Kingdom of God.

So if this word has spoken, let's not just be hearers but doers of it. Let this lead to action within you and in your space.

Conclusion:

I like to end with some encouragement and incentive:

If we want to be a church of witness and in any way attractive or challenging to local people the thing to do is provide a very attractive contrast to what is normal. Not talking about each other or reciting histories is actually a 'little thing' but determinative. It prevents defilement and pleases the Holy Spirit.



- Could St Matthews be a counter-cultural community in this regard?
- Could we be a church without negative talk circulating?
- Could we better enable the Holy Spirit to dwell and work among us?

That's my message:

Let's take this to the cross: