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## Introduction

Following on from last week's thoughts about the ancestors, Jesus turns his critical eye to 'The Tradition of the Elders'. Perhaps before looking at the detail of the text it might be worth considering the word 'tradition' and what it means to you? For many people tradition has more than one possible meaning, and its meaning has more than one possible implication.

In turn what of the concept of 'Elders'? Does this speak to you particularly of a given situation or specific term? Does it speak to you of our attitude to the elderly in contemporary society? Or does it bring to mind a romantic age when village elders sat under the trees making unhurried decisions?

Is Jesus here addressing a generational conflict of his day? Or simply criticizing a bygone age?

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## Text

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 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.) 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?" 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; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." ... Then he called the crowd outside and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." ... For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

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## Comment

This text brings out questions about the nature of Christ and his relationship to God the Father, and also about the difficulty for ordinary humans to discern and follow the will of God. On the face of it, in terms of ordinary modern understanding, Jesus was wrong in his assertion that he had no need of handwashing, and that 'there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile.' We now know about bacterial diseases and the spread of contaminated material being a cause of illness. This is scientific knowledge not available to Jesus in his day. How do we understand the story? Do we need to have an understanding that Jesus was always right, on every subject, every time? Or can it be that we simply know now things he did not know, and this can change our judgement? If so, what does the conflict Jesus asserts is going on, between 'human tradition' and God? Where do we find it in our world?

One solution is to argue from a silence that Jesus was not against washing hands per se, but only against handwashing rituals, washing hands in a method or manner to set oneself apart. Jesus doesn't actually say this, but it is commonly conjectured as a solution for the post-Victorian world where microscopic bacteria are accepted as fact.

The issue of arguing from silence, raises another difficulty placed before us by the lectionary itself. There is missing text in the reading as set out for this week, so we are also faced with the drawbacks and frailties of our own 'traditions of the elders'. The lectionary is designed for public reading, and so contracts the texts in order for them to be easily read in a service. Would some of the missing verses help us understand what was going on? Is it possible that some devotees of the lectionary might turn faithful following of scripture in set patterns through a set year into a pharisaical washing of pots and bowls? An activity that though it seems healthy is actually potentially a barrier between us and God, something that needs to be 'right'. If a system such as the lectionary is then imposed as the *right way to do things*, as a 'tradition of elders' it becomes an instrument which can divide Christians into those who follow the lectionary and those who do not.

So what was it that Jesus was objecting to in this verse? Was it setting up religious rules, 'traditions of elders' in and of themselves? In the missing verses, 17-19, the discussion is moved from the open air, to the inside of the house and Jesus provides an explanation for the disciples. He is not talking about *health*, about handwashing and food preparation for health, but rather he is talking about sin. The 'elders' traditions' had attributed the value of sin, that is something which is against the will of God, to washing or not washing, and indeed to what you can and can't eat. The writer of Mark's gospel provides a further explanation for us, that Jesus was also saying all foods are able to be eaten. But it is described as a 'parable' by that same writer, so not only is it about physical food but it is also about sin and how it works. Sin can't be imposed, put into us, sin can only be chosen, come out of us. Even if I were ordered to strike another person, I can choose whether or not to obey that order, our choice means that our sin belongs to us. We cannot 'blame' the elders, or our traditions.

What 'human traditions' do is they shift the emphasis of sin from God's emphasis - which is that each follower does the best they can not to choose to sin - to a pseudo-religious emphasis where religious authorities sit in judgement, and decide what is and isn't allowed. It is this hubris, placing themselves between ordinary people and God, which is the biggest sin for the Pharisees. They are trying to say they can choose to define sin for other people, and Jesus is emphatic, that is wrong, the prophets say it is wrong, and it has always been wrong. God holds the power of judgement, God will decide. It isn't up to the Pharisees, or any other priest or elder, to set up rules of human habit or behavior (whatever the justification) and then to behave as if not to do that is a sin. This is power-play using God's name to control other people's behavior. Jesus will not accept it. On this point, he is consistent and clear. God's verdict, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.'

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## Response

The response today will focus on Jesus' criticism of 'teaching human precepts as doctrines'.

It is easy in this exercise to slip into the practice of pointing the finger at others.

This is of course what Jesus is trying to teach us not to do.

Think of something you regularly like to do in your life of faith.

Think about all the good things about it, what it does for you as a practice.

Now think of the people you know who don't worship in this way...

How do you describe what you do to them?

How would you listen to their story of difference?

OR

Is there an Interfaith group near you? Have you ever got involved? Why not find out what you can do in your local area to be part of initiatives getting people from different faiths to talk together? Meeting with difference may be one way to tell for ourselves whether we are judgmental or not. Notice what you find difficult about difference, and challenge yourself.

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## Prayer

*God does not work by the human-made rules: Jesus did not live according to the tradition of the elders...*

God who does not work by the rules

Who does not set up rules for others to impose

Who loves the child, the widow, the tax collector, the prostitute

Let me live by your will

Not by human precepts

And follow in your way

For the whole of my life.

Amen