

hands, cups, pots and kettles, far from seeming trivial looks like a very good thing to be doing. Are Jesus and His disciples unkempt, filthy bumpkins? As you might expect, there is more to this disagreement than meets the eye.

Among the Jewish people of the first century, there were a number of different Jewish sects. We are familiar with the two largest sects: the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Smaller sects included the Essenes, whose religious practices came into focus with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1946. These scrolls were untouched for over two thousand years. Besides the Essenes, there was the Therapeutae of Alexandria, a contemplative sect whose members may be the forerunners of the earliest Christian monks: desert ascetics. Finally, we have the Jesus' movement; followers of the rabbi from Nazareth. Each of these groups stressed different insights from the Torah, had a different emphasis on the true nature of faith, and each had its own religious practices. Today's lesson about hand washing is one example. Hand washing, together with the cleaning of cups, pots, kettles and food, defined each community. These differences in religious and daily practices were not trifling: they went to the very core of theological belief.

This is seen nowhere more clearly than in the Gospel of St John, in the story of Jesus meeting the woman at the well. It is striking that Jesus sat with a Samaritan and still more striking that the Samaritan was a woman. He had stepped over cultural and religious boundaries. But, most striking of all, Jesus asked her for a drink of water. He had no bucket to draw water from the well. Jesus intended that they would drink from the same bucket. In what looks like a straightforward chance meeting, Jesus affirmed His belief that Jew and Samaritan, He and she, were one: both were children of God, siblings, both of infinite worth.

In the countryside in Galilee, the Pharisees challenged Jesus about hand washing before sharing a meal. It is because food is so basic, so utterly central to what it is to be human, so unquestionably vital for our survival, that food and food preparation have always been surrounded by meticulous practices and beliefs. In our time, there is an elaborate supply chain with food-preparation facilities, health and safety regulations and officials, policy-makers and 'food security' strategists all coming together so that we can have our cereal, milk, freshly squeezed orange juice and coffee first thing in the morning. Different cultures, including Christian cultures, admit differences: we eat cow and chicken and pig but not horse, dog or snail. Jews and Muslims avoid pig meat because they believe it to

be unclean, while Hindus believe eating cows to be sacrilege. In our time, in our society, it is not possible to mention food and its relative abundance without also thinking of food banks, and the rituals of hunger. There is no poverty greater than that of food poverty. What do food banks say about our secular society's belief in the humanity of all? Is it OK that *those sorts of people* and their children endure such debilitating misery and indignity?

Jesus was challenged about hand washing before eating. He said to the Pharisees, 'There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile'. Again, He said:

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.

The encounter between Jesus, His disciples and the city Pharisees is contrived but the narrative is crafted to illicit this central point: it is what lies in the human heart which is beautiful but it is also there that defilement may be found. In mystical Judaism, Hasidic rabbis say that, 'God desires the heart'. In Deuteronomy we read of an intense intimacy with the Divine: 'To love YHWH your God, to listen to His voice and to

cleave to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days...'. We are to cling to God.

The nineteenth century Carmelite nun, Thérèse of Lisieux described practising the Presence of Jesus. She said:

I was like those who are blind or in darkness; they speak with a person and see that that person is with them because they know with certainty that the other is there (I mean they understand and believe this, but they do not see the other...

The practice and experience of clinging to Christ is nowhere more poignantly found than in the hours of her death. After the agony of tuberculosis, a death which seemed to a friend like a crucifixion, Thérèse said, 'I assure you, the chalice is filled to the brim! But God is not going to abandon me....He never has abandoned me.' She closed her eyes in complete trust.

We find this same intimacy in the blind preacher, the mystic of Innellan, George Matheson. Matheson wrote of the work we must do, the life we are to live, as people of faith but he wrote also of our love affair with the Absolute, with the Divine. Leading his people in meditation, Matheson said:

My soul, God has a time for thee to work and a time for thee to meditate. Would it not be well for thee to come up betimes into the secret place and rest awhile? The burden and heat of the day are hard to bear, and impossible to bear without the strength of the Spirit.....Enter for one blessed hour into the secret of His pavilion, and He will send thee a flesh of light that will keep thee all day. Thy work for [others] shall be glorious when thou hast meditated on the mount of God.

The contrived story about hand washing equates the hands of the Pharisees with those of the Essenes of the Dead Sea, those of the Sadducees with the Therapuetae of Alexandria, and the work-worn hands of Jesus' disciples with those of a Samaritan woman. The story lets us hear Jesus say that it is the heart, the soul, that truly matters.

It is a stroke of genius that our sacred, holy Scriptures have pages of the most beautiful erotic poetry. God and humanity are lovers. God and the individual soul are lovers. In Jewish mysticism, the lovers of the Song of Songs, are the male and female aspects of the Divine. In meditation, we are lured into that union and ecstasy.

The greatest challenge for religion in the world today and for the churches is the urgent need to confidently recover the language of myth. If we forever restrict ourselves to scientific knowledge, to the materialist

narrative and to rational knowledge alone, abandoning intuitive knowledge, emotional and spiritual knowledge, we will not succeed. When the churches challenge poverty in solely material terms, failing to mention the beauty and dignity of the human soul, we reinforce the secular narrative. Our society idolises abstract thought over the depths of intuitive wisdom. D H Lawrence said that we have lost the sensual awareness, the sense-awareness and sense-knowledge of the ancients. The mind is much more than the rational mind.

The story of the hand washing is about humanity's shared humanity. It is also about the heart, the soul, the very thing that God desires. We began with hand washing; we ended in a love affair.

Amen.