



May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I was at theological college not only did we look at the Christian faith but we also spent time looking to other faiths. Our insight into Christian scripture can sometimes be enhanced by hearing a story from another source or faith, one faith that we looked at was Zen Buddhism, and there's a story within this faith which I think has something to offer in regards to message and insight into today's Gospel.

It goes a bit like this, but before I start who would like a cup of tea.....?

Its message through a Zen Buddhist story told about Nan-in, a teacher who was active a hundred years ago in Japan.

It seems that one day, Nan-in received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen.

Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he could no longer restrain himself. "It is overflowing! No more will go in!"

"Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"

In today's Gospel, Jesus encounters a group of people who, like Nan-in's visitor, are full cups that need to be emptied if they are ever to receive his message.

Jesus is in Galilee, yet some Pharisees and scribes have made the trip down from Jerusalem because of him. Mark's Gospel has already told us of the conspiracy to kill him [Mark 3:6], and it will be in Jerusalem, of course, that he is put to death. So it's particularly ominous that these people have come all this way to gather around Jesus.

What is it that they say to him? Do they look for some teaching that will guide them to live a better life? Are they seeking some word of hope and encouragement? No. What they do instead is find fault. They lack the nerve to confront Jesus directly, even though he has violated many of their cherished precepts, so instead they find fault with some of his disciples. What they criticise is not a huge moral or spiritual failing, but that these disciples omit an observance of human origin, a pious custom. They notice certain disciples of Jesus eating with unwashed hands, and this scandalises them.

The hand washing in question is not a hygienic measure. It is a practice meant to wash away ritual defilement, such as that caused by touching something or somebody deemed unclean. The Law of Moses mandates hand washing only for priests attending to their duties within the area set aside as sacred. The Pharisees, however, extend the practice to other circumstances. Thus they use this hand washing as a way for them to distinguish themselves and set themselves apart from the surrounding pagan population.

So these scribes and Pharisees who gather around Jesus ask him why his disciples fail to keep the elders traditions. They are what Nan-in calls 'full cups' that must be emptied. They are full of their own opinions and speculations. They view Jesus and his disciples as bad people, and this condemnation absorbs all their energy. Their cups are full, and anything more poured in at this moment would only be wasted. Jesus recognises these Pharisees and scribes as not simply a nuisance, but as examples of a spiritual danger that can threaten any of us.

So Jesus calls to all the people around him, so they can hear the warning he feels compelled give them. In effect, what Jesus tells the crowd is this: "Look out! Purity is not a matter of keeping external rules, without regard for what's inside you. Righteousness is not simply how you behave when people are watching. Just as you have an inner aspect as well as an outer one, even so, keeping rules is not what it's about. You must pay attention to the condition of your heart!"

What Jesus means by heart is not the muscle in our chest that pumps blood, nor our emotional aspect -- the Valentine's Day heart. Jesus understands the heart in the Hebrew sense as the centre or core of the person, the inner self.

He announces that the heart is where the problem lies. Our hearts are full. What fills them is, all too often, poisons that kill our spirits and the spirits of people we influence. Jesus lists these poisons. He names such evil intentions as fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, and folly. Like Nan-in's tea cup, our hearts overflow, but what they hold are not simply our own opinions and speculations, but poisons that can prove lethal for ourselves and other people.

This Gospel is not intended to render us helpless, but to make us see as people of faith the challenges before us. We live in a consumer society that bombards us with messages about how consumption can solve our problems. But consumption cannot solve the problem Jesus exposes. What we require, at the centre of our being, is for God to create a new heart. Repeatedly the overflowing cup must be emptied, so that the transforming grace of Christ can find a home in us. Along with Nan-in's university professor, we must be set free from our own opinions and speculations, and become, like children, susceptible to wonder at the miracles around and within us.

We will do well if we measure our lives, as persons and communities, by the standard of the Great Commandment that we love God with the entirety of our being and love our neighbours -- all of them -- as we love ourselves, serving our Lord with wonder, love, and praise.

Amen

Acknowledgments -

'The Overflowing Tea Cup' by Charles Hoffacker.

"Zen Flesh, Zen Bones: A Collection of Zen and Pre-Zen Writing" (Tuttle Publishing, 1998),
Compiled by P Reps & Nyogen Senzaki

"The Gospel According to Saint Mark" (Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), by Morna Hooker