

MARK 7:1-23  
DOES IT MATTER?

There are some strange laws: which of these is true? All beached whales and sturgeon must be offered to the Queen; MPs are not allowed to wear armour in parliament; it is illegal to carry a plank along a pavement in London; it is an offence to be drunk in charge of cattle; it is an offence to beat or shake a carpet or a rug in the street in London; it is illegal to import potatoes from Poland. Which of these is true? All of these are real laws; some go back to the 1300's but they are still on the books; so MP's are still not allowed to wear armour! Some are more recent – Polish potato imports were banned in 2004 because there was some disease in potatoes in Poland. For some, you can see the reason why such a law would be passed, but some just seem silly now when we read them – what is there about a plank along a pavement? Is that to protect other people on the pavement so that they are not bashed on the head by someone else's plank?

We did Messy Church yesterday and not long after we started running it I asked someone to have a look at what we did and tell me why it works. She said "there are no rules! People can come and go as they please and take it in whatever way they want." Now, the opposite side of that coin is that she thought that other church does have rules to follow and sometimes if you don't know the rules you find it hard to find your way! For example, we stand to sing. I don't know anywhere else in our culture where you stand to sing, or even where people sing together in public unless they are singing along at a concert or your team is winning the football match. We stand to sing: if you don't know the rule, and all of a sudden everyone stands up you're left wondering "what's going on?" If, as I sometimes do, I say "we stand to sing!" you think I'm daft – we all know that! For someone who is becoming frail and finds it hard to stand and I tell them, "still come and you can sing sitting down" and they find that really hard; "no, we need to stand!" We find it hard to adapt, to sing sitting down; we were brought up with the rule "we sing standing up!" Does it matter that we stand to sing? Does it not matter more that we worship God heart and soul?

This is the debate that is going on in Mark 7 between Jesus and the Pharisees. It seems a strange debate to us at first, but it is all about what matters. Does it matter? As we said earlier, Jesus' disciples had been out in the street and the market place and they came back and were eating, but they hadn't washed their hands; this was a ceremonial thing, a religious ritual thing; their soul would be contaminated by the world if they had not washed their hands before eating food. Mark explains in his comment: "*The Pharisees...*" (Mark 7:3,4) This sparked off a debate about "does it matter?" For Jesus there are two big ideas that matter and both of these ideas are being contradicted by the Pharisees' obsession with rules! Jesus' first big idea is: "what are we like inside?" What kind of people are we? His second big idea: people matter more than things.

We're not sure where this takes place, but probably somewhere in Galilee, Capernaum maybe. This group of Pharisees has come from Jerusalem and they're watching! They are watching Jesus and His disciples, how they behave, what they do; they are trying to understand this new man, this person Jesus of Nazareth. What they see bothers them! The disciples are not keeping the rules and we've said already this is all about religious ceremony rather than hygiene. Jesus is not telling them off, but letting them go. So they began a conversation; "does it matter?" is the big theme of that conversation. Jesus challenges their way of thinking about rules and regulations and asks them to consider "does it matter?" and that comes out in these two ways.

*What are we like inside?* Here's hard-hitting Jesus, quoting from the Bible: "*Isaiah was...*" (Mark 7:6f) The implication behind that Bible quote – this is what the Pharisees are like. They think they honour God with all their religious ceremonies, but their hearts are far away. They spend all their time and energy keeping the rules, but they have forgotten the big idea, the big

command – to love God heart and soul. We don't like the word "hypocrite" – its original meaning was "playactor" and you can see why; someone is playing a part, pretending to be something on the outside when inside the reality was quite different. Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees is that on the outside they looked religious and pious, but inside they were very different. On the outside they appeared to acknowledge God, but their hearts were quite different; they were self-obsessed rather than loving God heart and soul. When you clean your teapot, which bit do you clean? For me, I would wash out the inside and not really care what the outside looks like; does it matter to the cup of tea what the outside looks like? The Pharisees obsessed about the outside and cared little for the inside! Does it matter? On the outside or the inside, as a person?

*People matter more than things.* The second part of the conversation was about the command to honour parents and then the way the Pharisees had set that aside because of their rules. A son has devoted his money to God, but now his parents need help. But the Pharisees insist that the money is devoted; he can't help his parents because the rule must be enforced! The man's parents go un-helped because the rule can't be changed. The rule is more important than the needs of this man's parents and keeping the command. The second big idea is to love your neighbour! Jesus said so much about loving other people and here is the other side of that coin; "you can't love because the resources by which you might love have been tied up in red tape!" They lost the big idea for the sake of making sure that the rule is enforced. Does it matter that the rule is kept? Does it not matter more that this man's parents are cared for? It seems that there is no contest!

And yet... Churches still create rules and still have to be challenged by today's phrase "does it matter?" Once upon a time, some people paid a rent for their pew in church; there would be a register with your names and which pew you rented and was yours; now if you are a visitor, someone might say "you're sitting in my pew" and often there is an accusation goes with it; and the subtext is "move and let me sit in *my* seat". Does it matter? Would you rather welcome the visitor and make them feel at home? You want a cup of tea after your Kirk Session meeting; the only cups have the Women's Guild badge on them; "you can't use the Guild cups without their permission!" Really? Well, yes! So, there is no tea, no hospitality because of the rules that are established. The new minister announces a hymn and it is printed in the Order of Service, but she announces it as from Mission Praise and one member of the congregation stands but stoney-faced, not singing; he explains later with anger in his voice "it's not from the Church Hymnary". It is the same hymn, with the same words that are in the Church Hymnary, but it is the wrong book, so he will not sing! None of these stories is made up! I've heard all of them from friends and colleagues, stories about the Church in twentieth, if not twenty-first century Scotland. Does it matter?

Another time Jesus was asked "What does matter?" He quoted the Bible: "*Love the...*" (Mark 12:30f) There are two big ideas, love God and love other people. Nothing else matters! Does what we do and the way in which we do things help us to love God, help us to express our worship for God heart and soul? Or does it get in the way? Does what we do and the way in which we do things help us to love other people wherever we find them? Or does it get in the way? We can ask these questions about any part of church life, or even any part of our life. Does it matter if we don't do it this way? It is hard for us when we've been used to church or life lived in a particular way, then to change and make it new, but that's the challenge with which the Bible brings us face-to-face this morning! Would you rather keep this rule and make sure it doesn't get changed or would you rather love God heart and soul? Is that too black and white for you? But Jesus saw that often keeping the rules gets in the way of heart-love for God: "*these people...*" (Mark 7:6)

John Stott wrote a challenging little book called *Christ the Controversialist* and one of the bible stories he considered was our story today. As part of that chapter, he asks does the Christian look like a Christmas tree or a fruit tree? The Christmas tree is colourful only because the

decorations are tied on artificially; the fruit tree has fruit that grows from the life of the tree inside. The Christian is to be like the fruit tree. Our love for God and our love for other people are the fruit of the Spirit at work in our hearts, and are not artificially tied on because we keep a whole host of rules. Hearts that love God heart and soul and are devoted to Jesus; hearts that love others and care for people in need – that's what matters most; nothing must take us away from that, ever. Be the fruit tree that is full of life and brings fruit as it grows and stays green even into old age – that's what we should be; that should be our prayer.

Does it matter? It is a brilliant question to keep asking ourselves when we're faced with these dilemmas. Does it matter that someone is sitting in the seat I usually sit in? Does it matter more that I make that person feel at home in our church family? Does it matter that the preacher doesn't wear a clerical shirt and collar? Does it matter more that we hear the gospel? Does it matter that we have Jaffa cakes with our coffee? Does it matter more that we take time to talk to other people and offer hospitality to the stranger and the visitor? What does matter? That was Jesus' question. The Pharisees were convinced that lots of rules about religious ceremonies were key; they say, "keep the rules" and there are plenty of them. Jesus is convinced that what we are like inside matters more; Jesus is convinced that people matter more than things. What matters to you?