
Jesus replied (to the Pharisees), "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." Mark 7:6

“Fiddler on the Roof” is a famous musical by Jerry Bock, Sheldon Harnick, and Joseph Stein, set in Russia in 1905, based on “Tevye and his Daughters” (or “Tevye the Dairyman”) by Sholem Aleichem. It is a famous musical of a Jewish family in Russia in the time leading to the Russian revolution. Tevye and his wife Golda, and five daughters, are Jews. The plot of “Fiddler on the Roof” is the matchmaking of these three daughters. The Jewish tradition had a ‘matchmaker’ who would select the prospective husbands (therefore, arranged marriages, as was Tevye’s and Golda’s). But the girls want to choose their own husbands and not use the matchmaker. The first daughter marries a poor tailor. The second daughter marries a man who ends up a soldier in Siberia. Then came the third daughter, Chava. Not only did she not use the matchmaker; but worse yet, in fact the worse thing that ever could happen to a Jewish family, was that she fell in love with a non-Jew, Fyedka, a Bolshevik. Here Tevye refused to give his daughter in marriage and he refused to bless her. He kicked her out of the house and declared her as dead.

Much later, at the very end of the story, the revolution was starting in Russia, and the Jews, including Tevye and Golda, were fleeing. This family was being fractured, never to see each other again. And then comes the last scene of the movie. The family said good-bye to each other, and suddenly the youngest daughter and her Bolshevik husband walk forward, coming from nowhere, to say the last goodbye to her father. And perhaps to be blessed by him, and perhaps, to be at peace with the man she deeply loved.

Tevye was caught. What should he do? He had vowed that his daughter was dead, that he would never speak with her again, now he was caught. And he needed to say goodbye to that daughter. And finally, in despair, Tevye turned his back on his daughter. He turned away from her, and he bent over the fence in brokenness and in grief. No blessing... No peace... Just a whispered word through Golda... And the story ends...

How is your ‘heart’? What troubles your ‘heart’? How can other people cause your heart to be troubled? How does sin affect one’s heart...?

The Gospel this day asks us to look beyond ‘external things’ and to consider the state of ‘the heart’. And we are called by Jesus to seriously consider the state of the ‘human heart’. Of course, Jesus is not speaking of our physical heart which beats blood through our bodies, but the ‘heart’ of our being. The heart became the focus for all the vital functions of the body; including both intellectual and spiritual life. The heart and the intellect are closely connected, the heart being the seat of intelligence. Not only is the heart associated with the activities of the mind and the will, but it is also closely connected to the feelings and affections of a

person. And 'the heart' is spoken of in Scripture as the centre of the moral and spiritual life.

As we think about 'the heart', we may also reflect on Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees. In the Gospel for today a group of church leaders belonging to a group called 'Pharisees' questioned the actions of some of Jesus' disciples. They said the disciples had not followed the 'traditions' of the past. Now before we jump to harshly on the Pharisees we need to understand what they were really referring to. They were referring to certain 'ritual washings' for food (and the like) before people would eat (and the like). At the background to these ritual washings was a time of captivity many centuries before (think Daniel and the like) and the people did not want to eat food that had been offered to other idols. So certain 'rituals' were developed to say that various items were 'clean'. The Pharisees original concern when it came to 'ritual washings' was that people would know they belonged to God.

But over time their concerns had become somewhat otherwise. Instead of wanting people to be reassured in the faith (that they weren't doing anything bad) the rules had become a vehicle to control people. Furthermore, as Jesus clearly indicated, while those same religious leaders expected certain religious activities from others they were using the same word of God to avoid caring for their own families. In other words, their hearts weren't right when it came to keeping religious rituals.

Jesus clearly realized it was possible for a person to 'outwardly give the appearance of following 'the law' and yet be 'in the heart' a deceitful, evil person.

Now we must also remember that Jesus was a person who liked tradition. In Luke 4:16 (and elsewhere) we hear that on the Sabbath day Jesus went into the synagogue, as was His 'custom'. Jesus had a 'custom' or a 'tradition' of going into a worship building every week to be with God's people. In Second Thessalonians (2:15) we also hear the Apostle Paul say, "So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings (in Greek, *traditions*) we passed on to you." And in First Corinthians 11 St. Paul says, "For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you." Paul passed on a 'teaching' (that is, a 'tradition') of 'the church, and in this case this 'teaching' or 'tradition was direction for the wonderful gift from Jesus of 'The Lord's Supper' (Holy Communion).

To have 'traditions' is not a bad thing. It is not a bad tradition for parents to take their children to school. It is not a bad tradition for people to drive on the left side of the road in Australia. It is not a bad tradition for a husband to say to his wife "I love you". It is not a bad tradition to sit at the table as a family, saying grace and returning thanks (and sitting with the television off and sharing time together). But in the end it is not just having these 'traditions' that is important, but what our heart is in relation to such things. Sometimes we can make these into a 'law' for ourselves and others, and in doing so we can make life miserable for people. Jesus is concerned for our 'heart', that is our mind, our attitudes, our emotions, indeed, our very 'being'... And Jesus said, "For from within, out of a person's heart, come evil thoughts."

We know things aren't the way they are meant to be 'in our heart'. As the Psalmist also said last week, our 'heart' and our 'flesh' cries out for a 'living God'. We may not always realise this, but it is true. In our 'flesh' we get sick and we need healing, and so often we cry out for 'someone' to help. In our 'hearts' we also experience heartache and trial in all sorts of relationships in life, and again we often cry out for 'someone' to help. And we all know that in our 'heart' and 'flesh' (in our body and mind) we all do wrong things.

Here we also are to remember that it's not the scribes, and not the Pharisees, and not the law that is the subject of Jesus' fiercest criticism. What Jesus subjects to fiercest criticism in this passage is 'the heart', or that which defines us as 'human being' (note the concentration of the word *anthrōpos* ("man") eleven times in the span of Mark 7:7-23).

But the Good News is (as the Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul says, Romans 8:2-4): "For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled."

This is an important word for us to hear today. We live in a culture that honours that which comes from within the human heart—that gives us permission to act on our feelings. It is our 'heart' that drives us. But Jesus looks at our 'heart' in a radically different way.

We've all had our heart broken in some way — maybe by disappointment, fear, shame, rejection, or ridicule. One of the most painful emotional experiences is that of a "broken heart" whether it be from a severed relationship or the death of a loved one. Everyone has to deal with a broken heart at some point in life because we live in a fallen world. But God gives hope to all those who suffer from a broken heart by promising both His abiding presence and His overflowing peace. Psalm 34:18 says that the Lord "is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

Many, many years ago, God promised; *"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you"* (Ezekiel 36:26-27). This is what Jesus Christ came to do. By living the perfect life and dying the perfect sacrificial death, Jesus makes a way for sinful-hearted people like you and me to have a fresh start, a new beginning, with a new heart. God gives us a new heart. You have a transformed heart. No matter what state you are in right now, your life is radically changed by Jesus. You have been made new in Christ Jesus.

Someone once said, "Your identity is not achieved, it is received." Today, remember, God is at work in your life. You may not be where you want to be. You may have made some mistakes or had some setbacks. Know that in Christ Jesus, you have the righteousness of God. His peace fills your heart.

"Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." (Romans 15:13). Amen.