

What's the Sell-By Date? – Matthew 15:1-9

13 February 2011 @ 10am

Introduction

Good morning everyone

In our journey through Matthew we've reached the first 9 verses of chapter 15. And, and I'm not going to beat about the bush here, they're 9 bruising verses. They're about Jesus going head-to-head with the Jewish theological heavyweights of the day, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law

But please stick with me – because they're also some of the most important verses in the whole of the New Testament. Especially if we want understand how to do true worship together, here at Southover.

I'm going do two things this morning. Firstly I'm going to run through what actually happened in this incident. Then secondly, I'm going to talk about the implications for us at Southover. Got that? Firstly, a run through the passage; secondly, see what it means for us here at Southover.

It would be really helpful if you could have your pew Bibles open on page 982

The incident (vv1-9)

Okay, so let's get straight into it!

Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!" (vv1-2)

I don't know about you but my first thought is to say: "What kind of a question is that? Jesus is performing incredible miracles: he's feeding the 5000; he's walking on water; he's healing huge numbers of people!

And the best question the Pharisees can come up with is: "Why don't your disciples wash their hands before they eat?" What's the matter with them?

I'll tell you what the matter is: The Pharisees don't want a Messiah who does things differently from them:

They don't want a Messiah who hangs out with tax collectors and sinners

They don't want a Messiah who touches unclean lepers

They don't want a Messiah who heals people on the Sabbath

They'll only accept a Messiah who respects the traditions of the elders. And that includes hand washing.

Now there are many traditions to do with hand washing:

When I was at my primary school in Kenya we had to line up and have our hands inspected before lunch. And if our hands weren't clean, first we went to clean them and then we went

to the back of the queue. It didn't take us long to learn to wash our hands properly before eating!

But let's be clear on this:

The hand washing the Pharisees are asking about isn't about hygiene.

It's about ritual. It's about tradition.

There were basins of water all over Israel. You would hold your hand up in the air, and pour about an eggshell's worth of water over your fingertips. If the water dripped down as far as your wrist, then you were okay. You did the same thing with the other hand, and then you were ritually clean.

But if you read about it in Exodus 30:17-21, it says that this rule on cleansing is a regulation for Aaron and his descendants! It turns out that it isn't a law for the people at all; it's a rule for the priests! But the Jewish leaders were so afraid of becoming unclean that they wanted everyone to do it!

So, when the Pharisees say to Jesus *"Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?"* he ignores their question.

Instead in verse 3 he asks them a question *"And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?"*

And he goes on in verses 4-7, to give them an example of how they do actually this

First Jesus reminds them – as if they needed reminding! – of the fifth commandment *"Honour your father and mother."* (Exodus 20:12) Of course, the word "honour" not only means holding your parents in high esteem, but caring for them as they get older.

But he says in verse 5 *"But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,' he is not to 'honour his father' with it!"*

In effect the Pharisees were saying *"There's a way you can get out of having to take care of your parents when they get old. Dedicate your money to God! Then when your parents need money from you, you can say 'I'm sorry. I devoted it all to the Lord. I can't give you any.*

"But", they continued, "Here's the really clever thing about it, if you ever need the money for yourself, no problem. You can just take back as much as you want for yourself."

No wonder Jesus calls the Pharisees hypocrites! He's incensed by the callous selfishness of their tradition.

He's saying: *"You throw a fit when my disciples don't follow one of your little rules, but you're telling people it's okay to break one of the biggest rules of all – one of the Ten Commandments!"*

And Jesus goes on to tell them in verse 6 that they've allowed their traditions to become more important than God's Word: *"Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition."* (v6)

Finally, he strongly condemns the Pharisees by applying to them, some words from the prophet Isaiah:

⁷ *You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:*

⁸ *These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.*

⁹ *They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.”*

This is simply shocking language for Jesus to have used.

I don't know, but I suspect that he may have hated hypocrisy almost more than any other sin.

But although Jesus is using strong language, his message is chillingly clear:

He's telling the Pharisees that their false tradition has become so important to them, that their hearts are distant from God, and that their worship of him is a waste of time

So the message of these 9 verses turns out to be very straightforward indeed and it's simply this: Follow God's Word rather than human tradition.

(He was saying: Make sure that you give precedence to God's Word over human wisdom.)

Application to Southover

Okay, we've looked at the passage and we've seen what the message is.

Now I want us to think through what it means for us here at Southover

And I'm going to start by looking at the whole tradition thing

Everyone has traditions. Everyone. They're one of the things that make us who we are. And traditions aren't all bad. Indeed many are very good indeed.

Fiona's family have a tradition that I really like. Every 6 months, around the time of Fiona and her sister's birthdays, we all get together for a meal in a pub in Hartfield. We were there on Friday night. It's something we've done for many years now and it's always a good occasion. Actually the bit I like about it best is that my father-in-law pays the bill!

Traditions are practices we do again and again over periods of time.

They become ways that we live, and give us standards and boundaries that we learn to walk in.

Traditions are an important part of being human

All churches have traditions too and Southover is no exception:

In fact, what we're doing right now is a tradition.

The shape of our services, the number of hymns and songs we sing, having a choir, the way we do our prayers, the fact that our clergy don't robe except at the 8am BCP service, the emphasis we put on our preaching

Having a paid full-time youth minister and other staff, the way we pass the trays of bread and the multiple cups of wine in our evening service, instead of all getting up and going to a few distribution points

The coffee and tea we have after our services

Our church buildings, our pews, our organ, the digi-projector, the way we try to give a warm welcome to people as they come in

Basically, everything we do... and everything we don't do: are our traditions

Can I show you a Bible verse for each of the things we do here? Yes, I can show you a Bible verse for singing, praying, giving, communion, preaching, gathering, fellowship, teaching, learning, growing, evangelising, etc.

But the specifics of how we do it are largely traditions.

Now, because we're a church community
Because we're not a machine but a family of faith
Because we're a living body with a variety of members
Our traditions don't stand still

We sometimes stop traditions – about eight years ago we stopped using hymn books and now use service sheets instead

We sometimes change traditions – about 4 months ago we moved the start of this service from 10.30 to 10.00

And we sometimes start new ones – our new 11.15 service is already building some of its own traditions

But there's something else about traditions that's really important to understand — they don't last forever.

Traditions are man-made structures and they're not permanent.

Within the context of the church some traditions may last for a long time – think the Book of Common Prayer or the King James Bible, both still going after about 400 years

Other traditions have a fairly short shelf-life – think the Alternative Service Book or some of our modern songs

But all traditions ultimately have a shelf-life; they have a sell-by date.

These days when Fiona and I go food-shopping, we look much more carefully at the sell-by labels than we used to. This follows a rather embarrassing incident when I made David Garratt a cup of coffee, which he complained was a bit lumpy. When I checked I realised that the milk I'd used was after its sell-by date and had gone off! (I think that he's forgiven me but I've noticed that he always carefully checks his coffee now...)

A bit like the food we buy in a supermarket, all traditions have a sell-by date

Okay let's go back to the passage and remind ourselves of its message. It was this: Follow God's Word rather than human tradition.

Now let me ask you this:

Do you see why this message is so important to us at Southover?
Can you see the implications of what Jesus is saying in it?

Because what he's saying is this: we need to examine ourselves in case our worship is in vain

Consider this for a moment:

Do you think that the Pharisees thought that their hearts were far from God?
Do you think that they thought that their worship was in vain?

No, of course not! They thought that they were doing the right thing! That's the scary part about all this!

Because the point is this: if the Pharisees got it so wrong, why couldn't we?
Why couldn't we be getting it wrong?

Is there something, anything, in our tradition that's getting in the way of our relationship with God?

We have to ask ourselves: Are we in anyway allowing our tradition to nullify the word of God?

Because if we are, then our worship here at Southover could be in vain

The whole purpose of us turning up here on Sunday mornings could be lost; our gatherings might be of no value

Do you see the seriousness of the issue?

Now let me say again. Not all tradition is bad. Far from it

Many traditions help us to remember, cherish, and honour things that are noble and beautiful.

The problems come when traditions are substitutes for, or in any way distort or distract from God's Word.

The problems come when we love the way we worship God more than we love God

The problems come when we love the way we do mission (or don't do mission) more than we love God

If that happens then traditions become an offense against God and a barrier to true worship and God's mission.

Remember: every tradition has a sell-by date

Every tradition has a point at which instead of supporting true worship and mission, it actively starts working against it

What we have to decide at Southover is this: what are the good traditions we should keep; and what are the bad traditions that have reached their sell-by date?

We have to constantly match our traditions against the plumb-line of the Bible.

Because unlike supermarket food, there's no sell-by sticker to help guide us!

At Southover, there's two key questions we need to keep asking ourselves:
How do we achieve true worship?
And what's the most effective way of organising ourselves for mission?

We need to measure everything we do against these two questions.
We need to do anything that supports true worship, anything that helps us do mission better
So the definition of a good tradition for us is this: it's something that supports our mission and our true worship

And conversely, of course, anything that gets the way of these is a problem.

In fact as a leadership we're constantly asking ourselves this question: Is anything we're doing that's getting in the way either of us doing mission, or of us achieving true worship?

And, and I'm not going to duck this, there is one thing that keeps coming up: the nave of our church. That's the bit that all of you in front of me, are sitting in

I and the rest of the leadership are totally convinced that as it is, the nave is no longer fit for purpose either for our mission or our worship
It simply no longer meets the needs of either of them
And, in particular the pews in it are a tradition that's past their sell-by date

There's no need for me to say much on this because we've already had a number of consultation days and there's plenty of stuff on the website
Instead I simply want to ask you to wholeheartedly support the project to re-order the nave

It would be simply wonderful if the same generosity of spirit that gave God's work here an extra £65k to build a larger staff team, could help us all to overcome our personal preferences, and enable us all to move forward together, in complete unity

We need the flexibility that will come from removing most of our pews and replacing them by chairs.

We need to choose the right chairs for the things we want to do

We need to improve the general ambience by sanding and sealing the floor and painting the walls

We need to improve our entrance lobby

We need to make our nave totally fit for purpose

If the 11.15 is to grow, it needs to be able to move out of the Church Hall and relocate into here

If we're to successfully create an environment that the community around us can fully use Monday to Saturday, we need to be able give them useable space

I know that some of the decisions won't be easy
I know that some of you have personal reservations about all this
I know that some of you would prefer things stay the same
I know that for some of you this will be quite a sacrifice

But if we're to fulfil God's commandment to us in Matthew, to go and make disciples, I'm absolutely convinced that this is what we have to do

Conclusion

Okay so let's pull everything together

In this bruising encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees, Jesus gives an uncompromising message: Precedence must always be given to God's Word over human traditions. There are no exceptions.

If we fail to do this at Southover, if we fail to give precedence to God's Word, we will inevitably find that our hearts become far from God and that our worship will be in vain.

Traditions can be good and bad. But every tradition has a sell-by date.

At Southover, we need to constantly test all our traditions against the Bible and reject or change those traditions that are past their sell-by date and get in the way of our mission and our true worship.

The pews are a tradition that has reached its sell-by date
Will you all, every single one of you, help us move forward together in complete unity of purpose and help shape the tradition which will replace them

I'm absolutely certain that if we do, we'll see God's power and grace released in a new and wonderful way here at Southover. That's what happens when we do his will.

Prayer