

Sermon - Act, from the heart

Based on readings: James 1.17-27; Mark 7.1-8, 14-23

My first girlfriend

- When I moved from a boys-only primary school to a co-ed high school I had no idea how uneducated I was when it came to interacting with girls.
- When the other school students with me starting developing boyfriend/girlfriend relationships I was intrigued.
- It looked like fun, and I thought it would be great to have a girlfriend.
- So I was quite pleased when a new friend said that the girl-next-door at his place was interested in me, and asked if I wanted her to be my girlfriend.
- He already had a girlfriend, so he was out of the running.
- I signed up on the spot, and then had a chat with her across the fence.
- She looked ok, she had a shy smile that was attractive - but the best part was that she liked me.
- So I had arrived: I had a girlfriend.
- After some time, my friend said that we needed to go out with our girlfriends - we needed to go somewhere with them - take them out.
- He pointed out to me that, after all, if I was going out with a girl, then I actually needed to - well, *go out* with her.
- I was a bit surprised about this, because I thought that once I had achieved the status of having a girlfriend, then nothing more need be done - that I could bask in the delight of the fact that I had a girlfriend.
- So my friend arranged a few double-dates to help move things along.
- And things did move along, after a fashion.
- We even kissed a few times, which I learnt to like - after some practise.
- I was rather annoyed when she eventually decided she didn't want to be my girlfriend anymore.
- I had enjoyed the idea of having a girlfriend very much, and I felt quite let down by her decision.
- I guess that was the start of my education into romantic relationships - which managed to progress to the point where I could even become husband to the love-of-my-life.

Lip-service, or heart-service?

- Today's two readings, from James' letter and from Mark's Gospel, both address the same kind of problem that I had with my first girlfriend.
- It should be obvious that my problem was that while I might have had a girlfriend in name, I wasn't actually *in* a relationship with her.
- I wasn't really interested in her: in her likes and dislikes, in her aspirations and dreams, in celebrating who she was, in wondering how - and how well - we fitted together in our mutual relationship, and in enjoying the pleasure of a shared love for each other.
- This is similar to the problems that Jesus and James try to address with their respective audiences.
- In the story from Mark's Gospel account, some of the religious leaders have arrived from Jerusalem to see what the fuss around Jesus is.
- They are not impressed with how the crowds are running after him, and how he is addressing their deep-felt spiritual needs.
- So they find a point of criticism: that his disciples are not following the oral traditions of the religious leaders in that they are not ritually washing their hands before eating.
- Jesus looks into their hearts, and speaks out against their fixation on the outward display of cleanliness.

Sermon - Act, from the heart

- We need to remember that being ritually clean was fundamentally a concept of being considered worthy enough to come into God's presence in order to offer up worship.
- And so all kinds of rules and regulations had developed over centuries concerning what made one ritually unclean - and therefore unworthy - and what one needed to do to purify oneself in order to be regarded as worthy enough to worship.
- So Jesus says, in effect, that they are so fixated on the letter of the law, that they have forgotten about its underlying purpose and meaning - the spirit of the law.
- And so, in focusing on the outward form of the tradition, they are not only ignoring its purpose, but even end up - at times - working against its purpose.
- Jesus quotes from the prophet Isaiah, from centuries before - which also goes to show that this is a problem that keeps recurring.
- He says:

*This people honours me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me (Mark 7.6)*

- In other words, they were paying God lip-service, but not heart-service.
- The kind of religion they were focused on was an outward religiosity.
- It was like they could claim a relationship with God in name, in the same way that I claimed a relationship with my first girlfriend.
- In the same way that I had a girlfriend, but in name only - they had a God, but also in name only.
- Do bear in mind that Jesus responded in this way specifically to the Pharisees and scribes who were critical of him, and that there would have been other Pharisees and scribes who were focused on serving God truly, from the heart.

Be doers, not merely hearers

- James writes in his letter: *'be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves'* (James 1.22)
- I think that if someone had sat me down, and taken me through this verse of Scripture when I had my first girlfriend, it could have helped a lot.
- After all, I was merely hearing the word 'girlfriend', and focusing on the first part - 'girl' - which was something that was attractive to me, and ignoring the second part - 'friend' - which was something that I needed to put into action.
- If someone had taken me through this, I might then have realised that I was merely a hearer of the word as a label who was deceiving himself, rather than someone who was acting on the word as a relationship.
- And this is exactly the issue that the apostle James has with those who think that once they have been baptised as Christians, they have arrived, and need do nothing more.
- James effectively says: Yes, you have indeed arrived in God's kingdom, and you have received gifts of the Spirit.
- However, you need to use those gifts, and you need to put into action the new awareness you have received, otherwise they're as useful as looking at yourself in the mirror, noticing that your hair needs brushing or your clothes need straightening, but then turning away and failing to do exactly that.
- How useless is that?!
- Don't claim to have faith in God if you're not going to act on that faith.
- And, like Jesus, James provides a list of behaviour patterns that show that such self-deceiving people are like I was with my first girlfriend - deceiving themselves that they were in a faith relationship with God, but actually without a clue as to what that might mean in reality.

Sermon - Act, from the heart

- And James particularly picks up on the way that people talk about others, or how they repeat thoughtless or inconsiderate words. He says:

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless (James 1.26)

- Instead, James gives a contrasting description of those who reveal their faith relationship with God by the way they respond.
- They will listen to others with care and consideration, being careful not to be reactive.
- They will consciously address their own behaviour patterns that damage their relationships with God and with others.
- They will keep striving to enact God's law of love.
- And they will particularly look out for those who don't have a voice, or who are not able to provide for themselves.

An active mutual relationship

- I'm going to conclude with my own list of behaviours that I think brings an additional perspective to our faith relationship.
- And here I am referring back to what was fundamentally missing from the so-called relationship that I had with my first girlfriend.
- For each of us, thinking about our own faith relationship with God, through Jesus Christ:
 - Are we familiar with our Lord's likes and dislikes - the actual ones, not merely the assumed ones?
 - Can we say what our Lord's aspirations and dreams are, and are we helping these to be achieved?
 - Do we celebrate who our Lord is? If you're participating in this service, then you certainly do in this way, so are there further ways you might celebrate who the Lord is in what you do?
 - How, and how well, do you and the Lord fit together in mutual relationship - is there an active partnership between you?
 - And do you enjoy the pleasure of a shared love with the Lord? Do you express your love for the Lord, and do you know and acknowledge how much our Lord loves you?
- All these things might sound a bit strange put like this, but they draw on the concept that we are ultimately called to participating in the divine wedding, whereby Christ and his bride - which is collectively all of us - are joined together in a relationship of love.
- And Jesus, and James, in their teaching this morning, remind us that it needs to be an active relationship, that impacts on our hearts, and is shown through our actions.