

Last night was a great night – it was the first X-factor night of the season. Lots of hopeful young singers believing they have something to offer.

When we went to the first commercial break I was total taken by a new advert from the X-factor sponsor which talks about the gift of life; and then sentence *'See we leave our mark in the people we effect'*¹.

I was struck for a couple of reasons I had struggled all afternoon with my sermon which was starting with the theme 'What motivates our actions?' and here in commercial reality television in seven minutes seemed to be the driver which motivates most of our human experience.

But what struck me even more was that the second act that broadcast was a 37 year old man from Yorkshire with the most amazing classic rock voice who talked about how he had tried to audition when he was 20 but that his motivation and image was not deemed as appropriate and he had come back try again. Simon Cowell even apologised to him at the end for 'getting it wrong' 17 years ago.

I don't know about you, but I find the question of what motivates me difficult enough, let alone trying to make a judgement about what motivates others. Truth be told it is likely that our assessment of motivate is misinterpreted or misunderstood.

I remember not so long ago, standing up on a bus when a person older than I am got on and offering them my seat. She glared at me and said 'do I really look that old that I need your seat' – and she refused to sit down! I wasn't sure what to do, so I got off the bus at the next stop! Even when our motivation is well intentioned it may not be well received.

We don't always know why someone does something or why they are doing it – though often we might have a good guess.

Today's reading from Mark's gospel looks at one level like it explains motivation for one group of people, but because this passage has so often been used as a basis for antisemitism, it is important that we look clearly here at what Jesus is actually teaching, not just take on value the words that are being said. Jesus is not challenging a practice – Jesus is challenging motivation in today's text. And like our text a few weeks ago, the danger is as soon as we say we understand the teaching we are endanger of becoming like those who have misunderstood in the parable or story.

In much of the writing in the Gospels, Jesus often challenges the Pharisees and the temple leaders – those who had power and also authority for guiding others in the ways of faith. Jesus often challenges their behaviour; but he is not challenging their faith. It is popular misconception that the Pharisees and scribes thought they were

¹ **O2 - Breathe It All In - TV ad**

earning salvation by their obedience to the law. In fact, they understood that God's choosing and calling of Israel was a gift. They also understood that God gave them the law as a gift, to order their lives as God's people. Their observance of the law was meant to be a witness to the nations around them, to give glory to God².

In the time of the Exodus, and as we heard also in Deuteronomy this morning - Moses -- and the preachers that follow him -- must proclaim the commandments as the path to life. They are God's word. Moses' urgent hope is that the gathered people of Israel will hear, listen, and obey; that they will do what God teaches and calls them to do; and that in their hearing and doing they will form themselves, day by day, action by action, as people of faith. Then they will live and enter their inheritance.³

Earlier God also calls them to be a priestly people. The Pharisee's took the call to be a priestly kingdom and holy nation very seriously. They interpreted the laws concerning priests serving in the temple to apply to all God's people and all aspects of life. As priests serving in the temple were required to wash their hands before entering the holy place or offering a sacrifice, the Pharisees believed that all Jews should wash their hands before meals as a way of making mealtime sacred, bringing every aspect of life under the canopy of God's law.

These "traditions of the elders" were seen as a way to "build a fence around the law," to preserve the Jewish faith and way of life, especially in the midst of Roman occupation. The concern of the Pharisees and scribes when they saw Jesus' disciples eating with unwashed hands was about something much more serious than proper hygiene.

The Pharisee's took God very seriously and they saw Jesus and his disciples were disrespecting God by disrespecting the law.

So if this is the case – what is it that Jesus is challenging. Elizabeth Johnson, professor of New Testament suggests *that according to Jesus, the Pharisees had become so focused on the externals of faithfulness that they neglected to examine their own hearts. Their efforts to live faithfully were putting up walls of alienation instead of drawing them closer to God and to their neighbours. The rituals they observed created a spiritual hierarchy between the "clean" and the "unclean." Instead of expressing the holiness of God.*⁴

The danger is, it is easy to dismiss this teaching as something that relates to the Pharisee's, as another reason Jesus needed to come and transform the world. But there is more going on than this. This is not just about the time of Jesus, this is also about us now. How are we like the Pharisee's? What lines do we create in our own

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3758

³ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3752

⁴ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3758

community about who is in, and who is out? Has our motivation to live out our faith in some way blurred the very faith we are attempting to keep?

It is a challenging question, and one that is even more complicated to answer. Which is why I think the lectionary jumps from this point in the passage, to something that is a little more concrete.

In verse 21 Jesus reminds us, "For it is from within, from the heart, that evil intentions come" (Mark 7:21a). The heart is understood here as the centre of human will and rationality, in addition to desire. It is the place from which all our intentions arise⁵. Jesus offers a list of evil intentions that, while not comprehensive, certainly reveals the depth of corruption that the heart suffers. It must be noted that Jesus does not proclaim the heart to be utterly corrupt; good intentions also come from the heart. But Jesus is making one clear point to his audiences – prepare your heart for the Kingdom of God; don't allow your motivation be distracted by your intention.

When Jesus spoke to that crowd, their context was much different to ours – but I think the question is still equally valid to us. How do our practices inform our hearts? How do our practices and judgements affect the hearts of others – and the potential for the world, and the kingdom of God to be different from how it is? In other words, what is motivating our actions?

This weekend is the start of autumn, and marks the start of the new academic year for many in our congregation. We are about to enter another time of change. For some, family members are heading off to University, or to new jobs in distant lands. Some of us are facing other changes – retirement or health challenges and many others besides – but what Jesus is saying in this passage is that it is not the new situations that the challenge or the danger – but rather the heart and the motivation which we bring to those new situations. So often it is the fences within ourselves, the limits we create – the pain we carry which are greater dangers than the new situations we will find ourselves in during the coming weeks and months. Sometimes it is our good intention which get in the way of moving forward.

I guess the challenge to us is to not let these limits be our sole motivation; rather to hold onto the fact that in the end God wants us to not be limited by laws or practices or even ourselves – but rather to allow those practices to liberate us and to be open fully to the potential God has given; or as I was reminded at the start of x-factor last night:

*'See we leave our mark in the people we effect'
The memories we make,
when we speak and we connect
The feelings we share*

⁵ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2607

14th Sunday of Trinity – 2nd September 2018
Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9; James 1: 17-end and Mark 7: 1-8, 14,15,21-23.

The secrets we protect
*The strength and weakness we project*⁶

Amen

⁶ O2 - Breathe It All In - TV ad