I have been listening in recent weeks to a series of podcasts which relate to our perceptions. The best I think was a very clever series by Malawian Comedian - Daliso Chaponda and how different parts of the world have approached migration at different points in history. In each of the podcasts however there was one common thread ‘What motivates our actions?’

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. It is too easy to misinterpret or misjudge.

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 of the bus at the next stop! Even when our motivation is well intentioned it may not be well received.

I suspect we rarely accurately understand what motivates another, though we may have a good guess.

Today’s reading from Mark’s chapter 7 at one level explores the motivation for one group of people, but it is a passage which has so often been misused that it is vital that we look clearly here at what Jesus is actually teaching. In the passage, Jesus is not challenging a practice – he is challenging a change motivation. Like much of the bible, unless we understand the context we can miss the point.

In much of the writing in the Gospels, Jesus often challenges the Pharisees and the temple leaders – those who had power and those who are responsible 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 earning salvation by their obedience to the law. But they did understand that God’s calling was a gift. They also understood that God gave them this gift in order to live their lives as God’s people. Their observance of the law was intended to be a witness to the nations around them, to give glory to God[[1]](#footnote-1).

This calling is rooted in the time of the Exodus, and as we heard also in Deuteronomy 4 this morning – Moses, and the preachers that follow him -- must proclaim the commandments as the path to life. They are God's word. Moses urges the gathered people of Israel to hear, listen, and obey. He longs for them to do what God teaches and calls them to do; and that in their hearing and doing they will grow as people of faith.[[2]](#footnote-2)

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 who were faithful to the law 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. It is a wonderful image that helps faith grew through regular practice and routines.

The “traditions of the elders” were a way to preserve their faith and way of life, especially during Roman occupation. The concern of the Pharisees and scribes when they saw Jesus’ disciples eating with unwashed hands they thought they were disrespecting God by disrespecting the law.

But Jesus challenges this – are you sure that your motive to maintain the faith has remained your only motive, or have you become so focused on the practice that you have lost sight of the original motives of Moses.

Elizabeth Johnson, professor of New Testament *explains that their efforts to live faithfully were putting up walls of alienation instead of drawing them closer to God and to their neighbours.[[3]](#footnote-3)*

It is so easy to do – to be motivated by a good intention, and then along the way to lose sight of why we had started doing the thing in the first place; or more likely to become so focused on the practice that the motivation no longer becomes the most important thing – which leads inadvertently to a different outcome.

I often see this with community groups which are set up in response to a particular crisis or need; eventually over time the meeting of the group becomes ‘the need’ even though the original motive has now past, often excluding others.

The question Jesus asks in Mark 7 is as valid to us as people of faith today as it was to the temple leaders long ago - What lines do we create in our own community which inadvertently excludes? 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 a few verses 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 here is the centre of human will and rationality, in addition to desire. It is the place from which all our intentions arise[[4]](#footnote-4). 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 God; don’t allow this motivation to be distracted by the means you put in place to achieve or maintain your faith.

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 affect the hearts of others – and their ability to experience God’s love? In other words, what is motivating our actions – and what impact are those actions having on our original motive which is to serve God?

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, to new jobs, new beginnings (becoming grandparents or parents) . 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 are 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. Sometimes it is our good intention which get in the way of moving forward.

The point God draws us to in these readings is - examine your motives and your actions and ensure that in these things God is at the centre.

Amen

1. https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\_id=3758 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\_id=3752 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\_id=3758 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\_id=2607 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)