

29 August 2021: The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity

Mark 7: 1-8; 14-15; 21-23

Pharisees & Pilgrims - Michael Brown

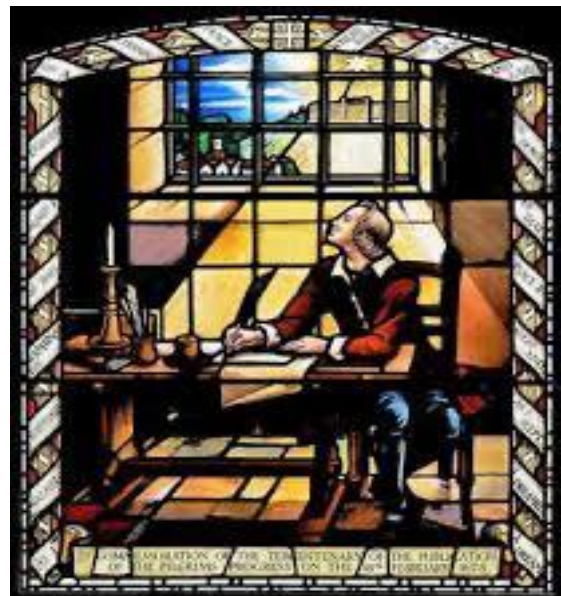
Tomorrow in its Lesser Festivals the Church of England remembers John Bunyan and so let us begin with this well-known hymn in the version with goblins.

HYMNS ANCIENT & MODERN REVISED 293

1 Who would true valour see,
Let him come hither;
One here will constant be,
Come wind, come weather;
There's no discouragement
Shall make him once relent
His first avowed intent
To be a pilgrim.

2 Whoso beset him round
With dismal stories,
Do but themselves confound,
His strength the more is.
No lion can him fright:
He'll with a giant fight,
But he will have the right
To be a pilgrim.

3 No goblin nor foul fiend
Can daunt his spirit;
He knows he at the end
Shall life inherit.
Then, fancies, fly away;
He'll not fear what men say;
He'll labour night and day
To be a pilgrim.



To go on pilgrimage, to be a pilgrim are activities which aren't peculiar to Christians or to ancient, medieval or modern times. Many people have a yearning to search for a holy place which they can't find in their everyday surroundings. But not just places. Many people have journeyed to meet someone and have been rewarded with an encounter the benefits of which have lasted a life time.

But of course for all sorts of reasons, going on physical pilgrimages has always been a minority activity. And just now when recently many of us have not even been able to make the journey into Newcastle, it might seem that any talk of pilgrimage verges on spiritual cruelty!

In fourth century Rome there was a celebrated recluse: an elderly lady who lived in one small room and never went out. One day she had a visitor who was doubtful about her way of life. 'Why are you sitting here', he asked. She replied, 'I am not sitting, I am on a journey'. This is a principle that each of us can apply to our own Christian life.

John Bunyan was fully aware that pilgrims may travel while staying put. The first part of *Pilgrim's Progress* ends, 'So I awoke, and behold it was a Dream.'

But there is one golden rule for all pilgrimages: the true pilgrim goes at the pace of the slowest, and this is what our Lord Jesus does. In our deepest need, he does not say, 'Hurry up slowcoach, I'm not waiting for you'; in words from the famous African-American gospel song he responds to our cry for help exactly as we need:

Precious Lord, take my hand, Lead me on, let me stand. I am tired, I am weak, I am worn. Through the storm, through the night, Lead me on through the light. Take my hand, precious Lord, And lead me home.

In today's gospel reading Mark tells us that some scribes and Pharisees had come from Jerusalem ('scribes' simply means people in the group who were professional writers of documents). He doesn't tell us specifically where Jesus was at this time.

But however far they may have travelled, it must have been a deliberately planned journey and so we might ask: were the Pharisees on a pilgrimage to see Jesus? Well, it is always possible that some of them were indeed anxious to see Jesus and to learn something of his teaching but rather than a pilgrimage their journey was more like an OFSTED inspection.

The Pharisees would certainly want to hear *what* Jesus was teaching but just as important to them, they would want to see *Jesus* teaching. It would be well known that Jesus had not been to one of the schools in Jerusalem as for example had Paul. And so two things needed checking: was what Jesus taught in accordance with the Law; what was his authority for teaching.

The dispute in today's gospel about washing hands and what foods could be eaten is, of course, just one example of the disputes between Jesus and the Pharisees over interpretation of what we tend to call the 'Law'. There may be some confusions here which it would be useful to sort out for our understanding of these gospel passages.

First of all, 'Law' in the Old Testament means much more than a set of legal rules. It means the full extent of God's revelation and it is a grace filled revelation, that is, a gift from God which could never have been earned or deserved. To remind us of these facts, it can be better to use the original Hebrew word 'Torah'.

Secondly, when we think about these 'dispute' passages in the gospels, we have to be careful not to let our imaginations get out of control. These passages don't describe Christian-Jewish disputes. What they describe are inter-Jewish disputes between a wandering teacher and the established teachers of the Torah. This means that they are conducted in a typical, we might say, standard way.

The Pharisees were interested in spreading a desire for holiness amongst ordinary working people and so when they ask why the disciples haven't washed hands before eating, the implication is why aren't the disciples taking advantage of something the Pharisees think will benefit them spiritually.

Jesus replies to the disciples in the standard way: he argues from scripture to show the Pharisees that what they are suggesting is a burden not a blessing. What may surprise us is how severely Jesus responds. A familiar explanation for this is to recall that disputes with friends can often be the most vigorous. But a possibly unfamiliar application of this principle is that it is generally agreed by modern scholars that, of all the various religious groups in Israel, Jesus was closest to the Pharisees.

Why might these reflections on a few verses of scripture matter to us? Well, if we follow a teacher who said, 'I am the way, the truth and the life', truth must matter to us. Objective truth is an increasingly rare commodity in today's society. One way for Christians to defend that truth is to ensure we interpret the scriptures objectively.

But the concluding words for pilgrims surely belong to John Bunyan and are from *The Pilgrim's Progress*: some of the last words of Mr Standfast.

'Then there came forth a Summons for Mr Standfast.' [He said:]

'I have formerly lived by Hear-say, and Faith, but now I go where I shall live by sight, and shall be with him, in whose company I delight my self.

I have loved to hear my Lord spoken of, and wherever I have seen the print of his Shooe in the Earth, there I have coveted to set my Foot too.'

In memory of the Rev Roger Hayden (1935-2016) - a modern day Mr Standfast.