

15th after Pentecost. Sunday 2nd September 2018. Canongate Kirk.

James 1:22 *But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.*

On Friday morning I drove to Mertoun, just beyond St Boswells in the Borders, to conduct the funeral service for the late Major James Scott of Burnhead, a regular member of our 10am congregation until he moved south to his Salisbury nursing home a couple of years ago. There will be a larger scale Memorial Service here next month – details are in the latest newsletter – but on Friday I gathered in warm sunshine with a much smaller circle to take our leave of him and to return him to his native soil. The burial took place at 1pm just as the One o'clock gun would have sounded from the Castle ramparts, appropriately enough for James who for many years both worked at the Castle and lived in its shadow. I closed the simple service with the Regimental Collect of the King's Royal Hussars, the successor of the cavalry regiment in which Major Scott himself once served – every regiment has its own collect or prayer and most of them follow a similar sort of pattern but I couldn't help noticing that this one was slightly better than most with an honest simplicity about it and a religious rather than a military priority not least in the line "Help us to dedicate our lives in that we may live for others rather than ourselves..."; let's consider that line today not least in the context of the encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees, and the advice of another James, the author of that little letter tucked away towards the back of the New Testament, *But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. Help us to dedicate our lives in that we may live for others rather than ourselves.*

The setting of the seventh chapter of St Mark's Gospel is Galilee, where Jesus has been travelling back and forth around and across the lake, teaching and preaching and healing in and around the synagogues of the villages he passes through. Suddenly he is surrounded by the most extreme form of traditionalists, not just scribes and Pharisees, as if that weren't ominous enough, but scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem, from headquarters, from the very heart of all that was ancient and sacred and traditional. Whether they had come especially, to check out what Jesus was saying and suggesting, or whether they happened to be in the area and had heard of the damage he was doing to their cause, St Mark doesn't tell us. But he tells us that they were every bit as meticulous and every bit as pedantic as we would expect, for immediately they notice that Jesus' disciples were eating their food with defiled hands – in other words, as St Mark explains for our benefit, without washing them. He goes on to explain how Pharisees in particular and Jews in general never eat without washing their hands, in obedience to ancient tradition; and he goes on to explain further how there are many other points on which they maintain traditional rules, for example in the washing of cups and jugs and copper bowls. Ironically the compulsory washing of hands and cups and jugs and copper bowls had nothing to do with basic hygiene, but instead had everything to do with the minutiae of the Jewish Law, which insisted that an elaborate and ceremonial washing of hands, not to mention cups and jugs and copper bowls, would prevent the same from being tainted by previous contact with the gentile world, in the marketplace, in the street, or wherever. Remember how the water turned into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee came from large stone jars at the door, used for ritual washing when people came in from outside. Remember how Jesus quickly found a basin of water to hand when he wanted to wash the feet of the disciples at the last supper. It was a normal part of life, such ritual washing, but our reading from St Mark's gospel suggests that it was the sort of thing about which the scribes and Pharisees had become obsessed to such an extent that they had got it all out of proportion. Jesus is under no illusion about their distorted priorities. "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites:", he tells them, "This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me: in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines". And

Jesus goes on to apply it directly to the scribes and the Pharisees: “You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition”. As far as Jesus was concerned they had got everything the wrong way round. The Book of Deuteronomy, at the very heart of their Law, had advocated, as we heard in our reading from the fourth chapter, that they must carry out the commandments of the Lord their God without adding anything or taking anything away from it. But over the years it was the more human tradition, not the commandments of God, that had been added to by every subsequent generation, added to and extended and explained to such an extent that the original, basic commandments had been lost sight of and all that mattered now was the detail of the law and nothing else.

It is difficult to underestimate the dramatic impact this challenge would have had at the time, for Jesus’ readiness at every turn and in every sense to get his hands dirty was both courageous and dangerous and his words and his wisdom apply just as well to our own times as to his. And even to our own situation. For our own church here is one with a long history and an equally long sense and practice of tradition, as our new Assistant Minister will no doubt find out for herself. But it is of course the human tradition of those, who over the years, over the generations even, have refined and revised our liturgy, our way of saying things and our way of doing things, and have done it very well. And it’s all very well, but the moment the tradition becomes the be all and end all, the moment the commandment of God is set aside in order to maintain the tradition, it is suddenly as meaningless as all those interminable rules about washing hands and cups and jugs and copper bowls. The tradition has to translate into action, there has to be a constructive, compassionate response to what we do and say in church and a reflection in the way we lead our lives beyond these ancient walls. James just sums it up so succinctly in the first chapter of his letter: *But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves*. And so does the verse from the hymn:

*If our love were but more simple,
We would take him at his word;
And our lives be filled with glory
From the glory of the Lord.*

And so does the line from that prayer: *Help us to dedicate our lives in that we may live for others rather than ourselves*. And now may God bless to us this preaching of his most holy word, and to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all praise and glory now and forever.

Amen.