

Jesus meets the people

Honour your father and mother

[Matthew 15:1-14]

“Then a number of Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked him: ‘Why do your disciples violate the traditions handed down by the elders? They don’t wash their hands before eating.’”

All the religions I know about have their basic rules or teachings and additional traditions. In Judaism the basic rules were the laws laid down in the Old Testament, but as time went on the religious leaders and teachers found naturally that these laws did not cover every situation in sufficient detail. This is obvious! No rules can every cover every human situation. Today parliaments of all types all round the world are permanently employed in drawing up new laws to meet new situations or fill in gaps in old well-known laws. Then the gaps in these laws, or statutes, are filled in by ministers issuing further regulations, and so the mountain of regulation grows. This happened with the ancient Jews. The result was the Mishnah. Although this came a while after Jesus it contains many of the “traditions” or regulations which were in force in Jesus’ day.

In Islam the same happened. The basic laws are to be found in the Quran. The inevitable gaps were filled in by tradition, called in Arabic the “Sunna”. These are sayings of Muhammad, called “Hadith” in Arabic, which were originally passed down by word of mouth and later recorded with the lists of those who passed on each separate tradition. Different Islamic legal schools accept or reject different traditions. Remaining gaps are filled in by the judges using their initiative, called “Ijtihad” in Arabic.

Christianity is somewhat different because, unlike Judaism and Islam, it does not lay down civil or criminal laws for a community or nation or attempt to control a nation (though this principle was perverted in the Middle Ages, for example). Christianity has no laws stating what should be done with thieves, murderers or adulterers. It is concerned with the general principles of a person’s relationship with God and his or her relationship with his or her fellows. However within the churches numerous regulations have been made to regulate these churches. In some churches these are called “Canon Law”. Another line of approach has been to introduce rules from the Old Testament which often have no place in Christianity. [*1]

Two major problems arise for all these religions. One is that the general principles are lost or even altered by the subsequent traditions. The second is the inflexibility of laws, which means that they cannot cope with new situations, and this is why secular governments regularly have to update their laws.

Let us return from generalities to the specific case described by Matthew. This starts off with an issue about washing hands. The Mishnah has a whole section about hands. It is called “Yadaim” in Hebrew. In the translation by Danby it is over six pages long. The first two pages lay down the rules for washing hands. Most of the rest relates to what makes hands unclean, in a religious sense, not in our modern sense of having dirt on them.

First of all for a valid washing of hands a minimum amount of water must be used. If a number of people are to share the same water for washing different quantities are laid down. Four times the quantity required for one person is adequate for up to a hundred people. Then the rules state what sort of container must be used and that the water must not be poured out of the sides of a broken container or poured out of the cupped hands of one person onto the hands of another. There follow rules about what water can be used and what water cannot be used. For example if someone has soaked bread in the water it is invalid for the purposes of washing hands. Next comes a discussion of how much of

the hands have to be washed and what happens if the water is poured on the hands a second time. And so on and so on. [*2]

The matter was serious for the religious teachers because they taught that unclean hands touching a food container would make the whole container and the food unclean, in a religious sense. [*3] In fact one teacher, by the name of Eleazar ben Enoch, was put under a religious ban, a sort of excommunication, for throwing doubt on the teaching about washing hands. Because of this excommunication, when he died the court ordered a stone to be put on his coffin as a sign of stoning! [*4]

So the matter the Pharisees and scribes raised was quite unlike a parent today telling his child to wash his hands for fear of transmitting some bacteria or virus! If Jesus could be shown to have objected to teaching his disciples the appropriate Jewish rules on hand-washing he could have been excommunicated as Eleazar ben Enoch was. [*5]

After a side-track Jesus returns to the question put to him by the Pharisees and scribes. He calls the crowds together and very publicly counters everything that the religious leaders taught on hand-washing, uncleanness and purification by saying: "Listen and take careful note. It is not what goes into a person's mouth that defiles him, it is what comes out of his mouth that defiles him." No wonder the Pharisees were so furious with him.

But we have missed out something very important. Before he answers the question Jesus throws a counter accusation against the religious leaders: "Why do you use your traditions as a means of breaking God's commands?" This accusation must have shocked and stunned them. Surely they were working harder than anyone to keep God's laws. Surely their traditions were a means of keeping God's laws more completely and accurately? But no! "Not so!" said Jesus.

So Jesus went on to give them an example: "God said: 'Honour your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.'" This was straight from the Old Testament. Jesus then poses a situation which I understand as follows: Someone has promised or dedicated a large portion of his wealth to the temple but has not yet actually delivered it. Then his parents fall on hard times and need his help. What should he do? According to the religious teachers he can't help them because his wealth has already been dedicated to the temple. This was the teachers' ruling. But Jesus points out that the person concerned has failed in his duty to his parents, a duty which was imposed on him by God Himself in the Old Testament. So the teachers have used their rules in their traditions to invalidate God's own commands.

Let us look a little deeper at the person who has dedicated things to the temple. Why has he done this? Without doubt it is to obtain favour from God. In his mind he is "better" in religious terms for supporting the temple with his gifts, and will no doubt be rewarded for his support. Also in his mind the temple and God have become one. Giving to the temple is equal to giving to God.

The person has either made a rash vow, dedicating so much to the temple, in his mind God, that he is no longer able to care for his parents, or he has deliberately turned his back on them for some reason. In either case he has not taken adequate account of his responsibilities as laid down in the Old Testament. So what should he do? According to the Pharisees and Scribes Jesus was talking to, such a person had to carry out his vow. That took precedence over his duty to his parents. According to Jesus the parents' needs came first, so the man should break his rash or undutiful vow and obey God. To put it another way the duty to care for the needy was higher than the desire to gain God's favour by giving to the temple.

This was not the only time Jesus said things like that. He said that if a person was about to make an offering at the altar and remembered that someone had something against him

he should leave the gift at the altar and first make it up with the other person. His relationship with God was based on his relationship with the people round about him, not on his “religious” performance.

So what of today? Have attitudes changed? I don’t think so. Firstly the confusion between giving to God and giving to religious institutions remains. In Jesus’ day the institution was the temple. Today it is the church. The Church of England has produced a booklet entitled “First to the Lord” [*6]. What it really means is “First to the church”! The attitude of the writers is clearly that giving to the church is to be identified with giving to God. By not questioning this assumption they are sneakily proposing it to the readers as if it were a basic idea which the readers must undoubtedly agree with. But Jesus did not agree. For him giving to one’s parents in need and by a wider extension to one’s “neighbour” was the higher demand. For Jesus “First to the Lord” meant “First to your neighbour”.

Of course there are churches which use the money they receive to serve others, but I don’t think I have ever been in the happy position of living in the vicinity of such a church. Last year my own church gave away only £150=. Some £18,000= went towards the vicar’s salary and several thousand on building insurance and maintenance and other administrative costs.

Of course under the British taxation system in operation today if the money is given by a taxpayer under a covenant the church can claim back the tax paid. There are therefore sound financial reasons for making such a pledge. But can such a pledge not become rather like the rash promise of the person Jesus spoke of? The pledge is made. It is irreversible, even if circumstances change and the money is later needed in caring for parents, relations or friends. There is therefore a dangerous risk in making such a pledge. To ensure that such pledges are kept the booklet “First to the Lord” recommends that churches should take action on the question: “who is responsible for following up those who default on their planned giving?” [*7] I cannot see Jesus approving chasing up people who defaulted on their, perhaps rash, pledges to give money. Can you?

There is another issue. Giving to a church or similar religious body can salve one’s conscience on the financial side. But we are surrounded on all sides by people near and far who desperately need help. In recent years I personally have been asked to help someone who needed a few hundred pounds to put down as a deposit on a flat she wanted to rent to enable her to escape from the damp and dilapidated flat she was living in at the time. Again someone out of work needed help in paying the mortgage on his family house to keep the mortgage company off his back. Not long after that some friends went through a divorce and the wife was left with an insufficient income to meet the mortgage repayments on the house in which she and her children lived. These were immediate and urgent needs. Putting up money to pay a vicar to perform church services was clearly a much lower priority.

But let us not despise all giving to churches, missionary societies and charities. What Jesus was indicating was that giving to the religious institution must not be seen as a way to gain favour with God. For God, care for one’s “neighbour” comes first, and this takes priority over any pledges made to the religious institution. We should also look carefully at where our money really goes when we give. Giving to a church is often no more than giving to obtain a service for oneself - a religious performance in a church - rather like going to the cinema. What does your church do with the money you give to it?

It is often taught from the pulpit that there is a duty to give to the church regardless of how the money is used. In other words the duty to God is performed by the act of giving. Many Christians are deceived by this concept. It certainly does not match what Jesus taught. We should give responsibly, with our first responsibility towards the needs of our relations, friends and neighbours in the widest sense.

But to return to the Mishnah. The teaching there in fact agrees with Jesus on the duty to one's parents. One section states that if a man saw some people eating his figs and says to them "They are dedicated, so you cannot eat them" but then discovers that the people include his father, his brothers and some others with them, the School of Shammai taught that the vow was not binding for his relations but was binding on the others. However the School of Hillel taught that the vow was not binding for any of them. [*8]

There are some detailed points worthy of note in this story:

- *1 For more details see my book: "The Framework of Christianity or: Are you party to this contract?"
- *2 See the Mishnah, Yadaim especially 1:1 to 2:4, Danby pages 778 to 780.
- *3 See the Mishnah, Tebul Yom 2:2, Danby pages 774-775.
- *4 See the Mishnah, Eduyoth 6:1, Danby page 432. I suspect they had actually wanted to stone him while he was alive but were not permitted to do so by the civil authorities, just as the Romans did not permit them to put Jesus to death, which meant of course that they had to bring Jesus to Pilate for the death sentence.
- *5 I do not know the dates for Eleazar ben Enoch. He could have lived before or after Jesus, but the attitudes of the religious leaders appear not to have changed much on any matter, so one can safely assume that their attitude to Jesus was similar to their attitude to Eleazar ben Enoch.
- *6 "First to the Lord". It is sneakily sub-titled: "Funding the Church's Mission." It is "a report prepared by a drafting group set up by the Archbishops' Council's Finance Committee, for consideration and action in the Church of England." [Third Impression 1999].
- *7 Page 36, paragraph 82 of "First to the Lord". There are many good ideas for churches in this booklet, but the underlying philosophy is seriously flawed.
- *8 See the Mishnah, Nedarim 3:2, Danby page 266.

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