

# On tradition not being a stuffed gorilla

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 29 August, 2021

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 14B

**Song of Solomon 2: 8-14; Contemporary Reading from *Mere Christianity*  
by C S Lewis; Mark 70: 1-8,14-15, 21-23**

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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What do we make of traditions - those of our own and others? Today's Gospel throws up that question vividly, although it is but one of several significant scriptural texts related to traditions. All of them, not least this one from Mark chapter 7, need to be read in context. Let us come to that in a few moments. Firstly however, we might reflect on what each of us understands by the word 'tradition' and on what traditions have shaped us.

What do each of us have to share together?

Last week, we reflected a little upon the theological challenges and insights emerging from black, queer, and intersectional voices, speaking through their particular experiences. Today's Gospel also comes out of specific experiences. We should not therefore read it simplistically as Jesus' comment on tradition for all time.

Just as it has sometimes been tempting, but misdirected, to contrast love from law too radically, or faith from works, so tradition(s) are not necessarily diametrically opposed to words such as change or development. In fact, healthy tradition typically encompasses them.

The great Samoan writer and scholar Albert Wendt has been one thinker to encourage us to be careful in our use of words like 'tradition'. Too often, he said, for Pacific Islanders, categories like 'traditional arts', 'traditional practices', and 'traditional beliefs' are colonial constructs: products of Western ways of thinking and cataloguing the lives and features of other peoples. In an interview of 2008,<sup>1</sup> he thus identified how colonial scholars used such terms when referring to other cultures and not their own:

*'Traditional' inferred our cultures were /are so tradition-bound they were static and slow to change; that they weren't dynamic and growing and changing; that because they were slow to change and fixed in history they were 'simple and easy to understand.'*

*Traditional also had implications about how we were viewed as people even to the extent that, because we were tradition bound, we behaved out of habit and past practice and [were] slow to adapt to other ways or change our own ways, that we didn't want to think for ourselves, or were incapable of individual thinking and expression.'*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://blog.tepapa.govt.nz/2016/12/20/opinion-why-we-should-beware-of-the-word-traditional/>

It is salutary for some of us to reflect upon that, and upon how it might apply at times to others who are pejoratively labelled 'traditional' – such as, for example, in Australia, some rural and regional places which can be unconsciously looked down upon by 'modern' urbanites; or, in religious and political circles, those who identify with particular cultural features rather than being resistant to change and so-called 'modernity' as such. Indeed, I'm often struck by the way in which otherwise so-called 'progressive' Christians are sometimes quite attached to buildings, styles of worship and music which are not very contemporary. Pitt Street Uniting Church, like many cathedrals, is somewhat like this, isn't it? In contrast, Christians using quite contemporary media, styles of worship and buildings, sometimes do so with quite old, and/or fixed, theology and spiritual practices.

What we see in Mark chapter 7 is a similarly interesting blend of new and old. For Jesus is objecting to some of the teaching and practices of the Pharisees, who, in some ways, were actually quite radical in their innovations. This is therefore part of the wrestling of Jesus' day with exploring what religious forms could bring new life in the midst of the fresh challenges of their time.

Entwined with this discourse are also ideas of clean and unclean, the pure and the alien: as Judaeans worked out what might help them survive and flourish in their subjugated, colonial world. Strictly speaking therefore, as Albert Wendt might have affirmed, this Gospel passage is therefore not really about being for or against 'tradition' as such. Rather it is about conflict over different pathways forward. As Wendt put it, in *Towards a New Oceania* (one of his most significant essays): '*there is no state of cultural purity (or perfect state of cultural goodness).*'

In fact, in relation to our text today, both Jesus and the Pharisees would have agreed that there is stagnation where tradition(s) are seen as fixed. As Wendt expressed it, the idea of a fixed tradition is '*an invitation for a culture to choke in its own bloody odour, juices, and excreta.*' He reminded us, '*No culture is ever static and can be preserved . . . like a stuffed gorilla in a museum.*'

Similarly, the religious option being fostered by the Pharisees was not about keeping an idealised past but one focused on developing the idea of the people of Israel as a priestly people. The American Catholic author and theologian David L.Gray outlines this well.<sup>2</sup> It meant that all Israelites needed to obey the 'traditional' laws of the elders concerning ritual purity (the Oral Torah or Law) that had applied in the past to the Levitical priesthood alone. The practice itself of washing hands for ritualistic purification is what Judaeans then, and Jews today, call the *n'tilat-yadayim*.

It is a practice which is done to remove impurities that a person, as a priest of God, may have acquired by touching ceremonially impure things, such as products in the marketplace. To perform the *n'tilat-yadayim*, all that is required is simply to rinse one's hands all the way up to the wrists with water. Why? Because, in the Pharisees' radical thinking, everyone's home is their temple and everyone's dining table is their altar and the food on it is their/our sacrifice and everyone/each of us is the priest (*cohen*).

Actually, doesn't that sound quite like what many of our ancestors in our Uniting Church traditions said, and acted upon, in re-developing Christian Tradition in the Reformation era?

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.davidlgray.info/2015/08/30/tradition-of-the-elders/>

In a way the Pharisees were, in effect, nurturing a kind of religious democratisation of their traditions, similar to the way in which Reformed Christians gave fresh meaning and practical expression to the idea of the 'priesthood of all believers.' In terms of the Pharisees, this meant emphasising that every table and everyone presiding at a meal was holy. Therefore, for the Pharisees, being that the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible) requires the *cohanim* (the priesthood) to be ceremonially pure before offering sacrifices on the Temple altar, it followed that the Oral Torah requires the same for everyone (as priests) before eating a meal. However Jesus' disciples rejected all of this.

So, to reaffirm, Jesus' teaching is not opposed to tradition as such. Rather, in responding to the Pharisees, Jesus specifically talks about 'your' tradition. The main problem for Jesus was that by exalting the Oral over the Written Tradition, people were being allowed to concentrate on narrowed religious duties rather than what Jesus called '*the weightier matters*' of the Law and tradition; namely those things of compassion and justice which flow out of the Great Commandment. Jesus also does not dismiss the Oral Tradition which the Pharisees were emphasising. The issue, for Jesus, was what happened when that was used to supersede the central concerns of faith.

What Jesus says about food in the Gospel here is very similar. As controversies in the early Church reflect, Jesus is not, as such, declaring all foods equally valid. That is a contested question which would be worked through later, as seen in the Acts of the Apostles, as more and more Gentiles joined the original Judaeen disciples. Furthermore, Jesus would have been aware that, clearly, some things can go into a person, not least drugs, which can profoundly affect them. Again, Jesus is not arguing here, as such, about specific things we take into our bodies, any more than Jesus is arguing about traditions as such.

The key point of Jesus is the emphasis on the spiritual heart: the soul of the person, not the outer habits. It is not to say that outer elements and practices cannot help focus and guide the heart and the soul. It is a wrong direction however to give priority to the outer or to shift the emphasis away from the relationship with God and with God in others.

Our Gospel teaching today thus offers us a way to assess and use any tradition(s) in which we have been formed, to which we are drawn, or which is alien to us. We are not required to judge or rate our religious and wider cultural practices as if they are in competition, or if there is some perfect expression which will suit everyone, everywhere, at any time.

No, the real question following from Jesus is: how do they aid our relationship with God, warm and deepen our spiritual hearts, enliven and renew the soul? Some of this may be cultural or contextual, which was why the early Church came to agree that the Judaeen food laws should not be compulsory for all Christians.

Some of this may also be linked to a stage of life and spiritual development, or a matter of personality. For example, there is a lovely saying in the Anglican tradition related to auricular confession to a priest.

It reflects the creative tension in Anglicanism between Catholicism and Reformed Faith, and of course the difference between 'high' and 'low' church Anglicans. For, if we ask one of the questions which have typically divided Catholics and Reformed Christians - should people go to confession, the rite of reconciliation? - the mainstream Anglican answer is neither yes, nor no, but rather '*some should, all may, none must.*'

For the personal rite of reconciliation is a potential aid to deeper life with God. It is one pathway, but it can also be a distraction – as the great Reformers also identified in relation to other aspects of received Christian Faith. Indeed, outside of Anglicanism, Reformed Christians have continued to view the rite of reconciliation as unhelpful.

In this they have followed the line of critique that Jesus was using towards the Pharisees, where outer practices begin to get in the way of what really matters; the inward state of the heart and the soul. Yet, like Jesus, the great Christian Reformers themselves were also not rejecting all tradition(s) but actually seeking to renew them in a deeper relationship with God: the challenge then, as before, and since.

The reading from C.S.Lewis we also heard today, offers another way of looking at our tradition(s) which reflects this. Following Jesus in today's Gospel reading - like Martin Luther, like John Calvin, like John Wesley - C.S.Lewis affirmed that direct relationship with God is the heart of the matter. Everything else ultimately amounts to nothing.

The rough RAF man he quotes was right in this. It is indeed like the difference between actually having a wonderful spiritual experience of walking by a beach and simply reading someone's second-hand description of it.

Too much religion has been, and remains, useless and incomparable to the experience of God the man had had. The core element is living into and out of that experience of intimate connection with love, and embodying it in our relationships with others and all that exists.

Yet, said C S Lewis in *Mere Christianity*, do not despise faith tradition(s). They have their purpose. Like the Pharisees' cleaning of outer elements, like confession to a priest for Catholics, like Reformed Christians moral injunctions, they can indeed come to distract. They can even harden us to the real claims of loving God and others. Yet, as Jesus would have acknowledged to the Pharisees, they could be aids to prayer, to the purifying of the unloving self, to opening and walking the way to God – just don't make it a thing!

C S Lewis' metaphor of the map is also helpful, as a way to look at and use tradition(s). Christian tradition(s) are not the reality of faith experience in themselves, but they are helpful records of, and pointers to, the experience of God. They are frameworks and pathways. They are also always related to the questions asked, and the experience gathered, in their compilation, and the perspectives of those who have drawn and redrawn them in the past. Bad maps can also be disastrous, which is why theology – faith map-making – matters.

How then will we develop our own traditions, as individuals and as a faith community?

What matters to us, and what helps us experience and share the love of God?

Are there elements which we over-emphasise, as the Pharisees did with their Oral Tradition?

What is core to helping us renew the relationships of our hearts and lives?

What do our maps look like?

In the name of the One who is incarnated in all traditions of holy love, yet transcends them all and calls us beyond.

Amen.

