

He said to them, It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.

*Take the words of my mouth, O Lord, and in your **mercy** transform them by your **grace**, that we each may hear your word for us.
Amen.*

It is perhaps hazardous for a preacher to say as an opener that it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles! Hence the need for that prayer! It asked for God's **grace** to transform my words, but perhaps it should have asked for his **mercy** upon you who are condemned to listening! - unless you choose to switch me off, or my voice gives up!

That opening quotation came from our gospel reading, which then went on to say that what comes out of the mouth *proceeds from the heart*. I hope that will be true as I speak. It usually is when anyone speaks, whether they mean to speak truly or falsely.

To discern the true nature of that which is being spoken of course requires **careful listening**. But it is not always true that what proceeds from the heart of anyone is *evil intention*, intention that defiles, although the list of evil intentions we are given in our reading certainly would defile any person who speaks them or lives them.

Evil intention is something that inevitably affects us all to some degree or other. As the Prayer Book says, we are all *miserable offenders*, incapable of avoiding sin, incapable of behaving in a way that does not defile others at times. Therefore, **grace and**

mercy are qualities that are essential to Christian living. No doubt we all aspire to **demonstrate** them in our own behaviour. But if we think that in reality we do so of our own ability, then we are as *the blind leading the blind*, and in danger of *falling into the pit*.

As Paul often reminds us, we are incapable of being in right relationship with God through our own merits, of earning our own salvation. It is by **God's grace and mercy** alone that we may be saved, if we have faith in Him. It is only in Christ that we can be forgiven for those things we have done that we ought not to have done, and for those things we have left undone which we ought to have done. Grace and mercy are essential to Christian living because we cannot live without **receiving** them from God, or for that matter from each other.

Our reading from **Isaiah** seems to be speaking to those who may be feeling **short-changed in grace and mercy**, at least as demonstrated by their fellow human beings. They are viewed as *foreigners*, and seem to have been wronged or *defiled* by others. Later in the passage we hear of *the outcasts of Israel*. Perhaps in Matthew's community these would have been termed *dogs, unfit to receive the children's food, worthy only to gather up the crumbs that fall from the master's table*.

Although in the eyes of 'the chosen' these others are unclean outcasts, that is **not how God sees it**. For out of the mouth of the Lord, via the prophet Isaiah, come words of **grace and mercy**. These *rejected ones* are reassured that soon God's salvation will

come to them, that there will be deliverance for them too from the injustices they have suffered.

This is promised to them **because of faith**; because they genuinely *love the name of the Lord* - and can we hear within this an unspoken criticism of the chosen, those who would like to appear whiter than white, like the Pharisees? They seem ready to take offence when Jesus speaks words that apparently defile the Jewish law. But perhaps they fall short personally in keeping God's law, like everyone else?

The faithful *foreigners*, on the other hand, those who feel they are not the chosen, *keep the sabbath holy, they hold fast to their covenant with the Lord, and they long to be servants of the Lord*. In other words, they are doing everything that is expected of the chosen. And for this, we hear, their sacrifices will be accepted on the altar of God, for this God is the God of all peoples; saint and sinner, clean and unclean, chosen and outcast. For He is the **God of grace and mercy**.

If we are bent on **misinterpretation**, however, as I think are Matthew's Pharisees, and sometimes some of us, our reading from Romans could almost sound as though God himself is indulging in some questionable behaviour! We hear that He has *imprisoned us in disobedience in order that he may be merciful to all*.

That **sounds like** divine behaviour that deliberately defiles our humanity and God's image, behaviour that uses and abuses us for God's own gratification! That does not sound like a God of grace and mercy. So that interpretation can't be quite right. We surely

have to **be careful always about misinterpretation** of what comes out of the mouth.

But were a corrective needed, it could surely be found in our Gospel reading, as we see Jesus **shifting in graciousness and mercy** in his response to the Canaanite woman. At first she seems to be the one who demonstrates grace. She greets Jesus as *Lord, Son of David*. But he, uncharacteristically in our eyes, responds to her as if she is an outcast, or at least one who is beyond his remit, so to speak: *I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel*.

Such a response seems to us contemporary westerners almost to defile her humanity. But then, like the faithful foreigners in Isaiah, she behaves as should the chosen, speaking words that are gracious, words that, perhaps out of mercy, do not retaliate. Instead she speaks from the heart: *'Have mercy on me Lord. Lord, help me.'*

Jesus's next reply again seems less than gracious, or merciful, but is not an outright refusal. He answers, *It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs*. His view in that moment still suggests that he has come for salvation of the chosen only, and not the outcast. Yet there is a perceptible sideways shift in his response.

However the reply of the Canaanite woman, this foreigner, this reject of society, is one of such faith that Jesus is moved to show the **grace and mercy of God**. She says, *Yes, Lord*, at first accepting society's view of her. But then comes her acknowledgement of her **utter dependence** on Him: *yet even the*

dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table. That humility, that honest statement of dependance, wins for her her daughter's life. Woman, great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish.

We are all unclean, rejects, outcasts, because of what happened in the Garden of Eden. We are all **capable of defiling others** by what comes out of our mouths, by uncharitable listening and by misinterpretation. And yet we are also God's chosen! It's a miracle that never ceases to amaze me.

As the beautiful Prayer of Humble Access says, we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under the Lord's table. We come to his table, as we shall do again in a few moments, not trusting in our own righteousness, for we do not deserve to be in right relationship with God. We **trust** instead in his manifold and great **mercy**. For He is the same **gracious Lord of all**, whose property is **always** to have mercy.

Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen.