

Mark 7:1-23

Here is a question, does Only Fools and Horses have any spiritual significance?

Well probably not a lot but during the week I caught the tail end of one episode and it happened to fit with thoughts that were going round my head from this passage in Mark 7.

Let me set the scene. Rodney at evening class has met Cassandra and having seen her house felt embarrassed by where he lived and had her drop him off in a nice street. He had inadvertently taken her coat instead of his and on the way home it had rained heavily. As he arrives home very wet Del greets him and says to him, "I know what happened tonight. I can read you like a book."

Rodney's reply was "You know nothing, Del, so keep your nose out." But Del was insistent, "I've got 20 notes here. They say that I can guess what happened tonight." Rodney took up the bet and Del continued, "Alright. That Mickey Pearce said that this Cassandra sort lived in a right nice drum. So this is what I think happened. You've seen her house and the snob in you came racing to the surface and you thought: "Ooh, how can I take her back to Nelson Mandela House?" So on your way home, you've made her drive up some right posh road - somewhere like The King's Avenue - and you stopped at some right nice little mansion and you pretended that's where you lived!"

Well Rodney blustered, "You don't half talk a load of rubbish!" Del asked him "Is that the truth?" and Rodney confirmed it was.

For a moment it seemed as if Del really could read Rodney completely but then it transpired that Cassandra had tried to take Rodney's coat to where she thought he lived only to discover they'd never heard of him and had then rung the flat.

So Del couldn't read what was going on in Rodney, though he did have a good understanding.

This morning as we continue looking at Jesus we see that he is the reader of the heart. He does understand us fully as humans.

1. An astute assessment

As we look at these verses we see these religious leaders watching Jesus and his disciples carefully. They note that the disciples were not going through the ritual washing of their hands before eating and, v5, they had a go at Jesus for not encouraging his followers to live according to the traditions as other Jews did. But Jesus wasn't thrown by this because he knew what was going on in these religious leaders. He could read them like a book. Back in Chapter 2 when some people had lowered a paralysed man through the roof and Jesus had spoken words of forgiveness to him, the religious leaders started thinking who is he to forgive sins only God can do that. In Mark 2:8 it says, "Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts". He could read their hearts then and he could do it now. He knew it wasn't God's law or a desire to please God that was at the heart of this complaint but an adherence to rules and rituals. Have a look at what he

says in v13, “you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down.” He knew they were more concerned with their traditions and rituals than they were with the word of God. He understood what was going on in them. Later on he would describe the same group of people as whitewashed sepulchres, looking good on the outside but dead inside. He was able to do that because he could read their heart and knew what was going on.

But it was not just these people whose hearts Jesus was able to read, he is able to give an accurate diagnosis of the human heart in general and he went on to do just that as we read in v21-22. This is a statement about the human heart and what he says is shocking but it is true. This is what the human heart, your heart and mine is like. Jesus knows us. He knows our heart both generally and specifically. But clearly what Jesus knows about the heart is not good is it? In general the heart is pretty rotten and even amongst those who were seen as the best most moral and law abiding people of the day Jesus saw a fatal flaw in their hearts and this leads us to our second point,

2. a false hope

If our hearts are bad then what can change us? Well the temptation of people then as now was to look to religion, surely that would help and make people good. However Jesus pointed out in these verses with devastating incisiveness that religion may well affect our outward demeanour but it doesn't change our inner nature.

The charge of the Pharisees against Jesus' disciples was that they were not following the law. By that they didn't mean the Mosaic Law but the oral tradition that had grown up round the law. Jesus' response in vs 6-8 was devastating. He accused them of hypocrisy of pretending to be what they were not. They were putting on a good show but “their hearts are far from me” and secondly “their teachings are but rules taught by men”.

Jesus was saying to them you guys come here telling us how we should live but you are in no position to do that. You may look good and may seem godly but your hearts are anything but filled with love from God and what you are following is not God's word but your own traditions.

Then he gave an example of them showing their true nature by their actions in vs 9-13.

As part of their law developed from the law of Moses was something called Corban. Basically someone could pronounce Corban on property and financial resources and as such it was then as it were dedicated to God and as such withdrawn from ordinary or profane use. That would look good but it didn't necessarily mean anything other than it could not be used by others for anything not connected with God. Like many laws it sounded good in theory but as Jesus says here people were using it to protect themselves either by design or by accident from having to use their resources to support their aged parents. If the action had been well intentioned, perhaps the son thought his parents would never need help but then something happens and they did, well as we see in v12 if he

went to the leaders and asked to undo the action he wouldn't be allowed to. So the greater Law of honour your father or mother was being set aside and denied by a human law. God's word denied by human regulations.

So human tradition was in effect nullifying God's law and heartless men were following that way. Yet they still had the gall to accuse Jesus' disciples of getting it wrong. They were claiming so much but at heart there was nothing. God was not at the centre of what they were about.

That is how it can be in that religion can look good but sometimes its heart is empty.

I remember as a boy playing in one of the fields near our house in an old car. It had all its seats and a steering wheel, gear lever, accelerator etc and four wheels but it didn't go because it had no engine, The heart, of the car had been taken out and so it was useless, You could sit in it for hours and make car noises but you always ended up where, you began, It does seem to me that the passage is about the heart missing from faith which turns faith into religion. So that while there are all the trappings of faith it is useless in terms of setting you right with God and all you end up with is a set of rules to be obeyed.

I am sure we are only too well aware in our own day that because of the fallibility of our hearts it is possible for us and for others to be singing and saying the right words, to be going to the right services, and a going through the correct forms yet our hearts to be far from God. We are running on empty!

That then will show in the way we live out our lives whether it be in business or in relation to our family or in sport. It will come out in our actions and all the religious activity we can do won't change that. It might make us look good to others but God sees the heart. It is a false hope, which leaves us,

3. The only answer

However the answer is not given by Jesus here. Here we are left with questions, if these guys are not good enough for God then who is? If these guys' hearts are not right and following the law can't change their hearts what can? The answer is in the whole book of Mark and of course is Jesus.

Mark's gospel shows us Jesus. The gospel is split in two with the first eight chapters asking the question who is this Jesus culminating in Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah, as God at the end of Chapter 8 and then the rest of the gospel asking what kind of a Messiah is he culminating in Jesus as the suffering Messiah who died on a cross and yet gloriously rose again. This is the Jesus of the gospels.

I remember some years back leading a Christianity explained course during which people were reading the whole of Mark. In one session one of the group members simply said that the Jesus she was reading about from Mark was very different from the Jesus she thought she knew about. So if

you are here this morning or listening to this as a download why not make reading Mark's gospel something you do during Lent.

Here we see Jesus who is God and who can change our hearts. If you have your Bible open at Mark 7 just look to the top of the page there and Mark 6:52 "their hearts were hardened". They are his disciples who had just witnessed Jesus coming to them walking on the water and were amazed but still not understood who this man was. Now look across the page to the bottom corner and Mark 8:17, "Are your hearts hardened?" They had seen so much of Jesus and his miracles and yet still there was no change in their hearts. However that would come and it would come through the cross and resurrection. We see such an example in the account in Luke's gospel of the two men who were on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus on the day of the resurrection. They were met by Jesus who taught them about himself from the scriptures and their words to each other when he had gone, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32). Their hearts were being changed as the hearts of the disciples were changed by Jesus and by his death and resurrection.

Friends this is why we look at Jesus regularly and why we are looking at him during this Lent in our sermon series, in our Lent studies, through the book by John Piper because it is only Jesus who through the power of the Holy Spirit working in us that can change our hearts. Only his power can give us a new heart open to God and only his power working in us can day by day take away from us the wrong attitudes and desires and so help us live godly and holy lives. He doesn't just read our hearts and know what we are like he changes them through the Holy Spirit so that our hearts beat with his and share his will and desires. But for that to happen we have got to stay close to Jesus, to be listening to him through his word so that our hearts burn within us as he talks to us on the road. Just on Weds in the first of our Lent studies we were think about Jesus as Son and how he was born of Mary and also Son of God. As we were talking about how that fits into our lives one of the members was sharing how it affected the way she dealt with people at work and the word humanity came to us in that Jesus in us changes our heart to make us the humans God intended from the beginning and that affects the way we deal with others as relate to people more as Jesus did because his heart of compassion and love is in us. Yes of course it is imperfect but it is there. So in a sense the encouragement for us today as we think about Jesus as 'Reader of the Heart' are the words we often use from Psalm 95 "today if you hear his voice do not harden your hearts". Look again at what Jesus says about the heart in v21-22 and ask how does my heart need to be changed and then come in repentance and allow him to change your heart through the power of the Holy Spirit.