

**St. Ninian's Parish Church**  
**Sunday 2nd September 2018**

Mark 7: 1- 8, 14 - 15, 21 - 23

“Aidan, have you washed your hands?” “Have you washed your hands Aidan?” “Aidan, go and wash your hands. We can't eat until you wash your hands.” How many times have I said those things, I wonder? A lot. After all, it takes years of repetition for children to learn unconscious habits. It also takes a good example. We often wash our hands together; after all if I didn't wash my hands, I'd be a hypocrite.

It wasn't me who started all of this. It was Florence Nightingale in the mid-19th century. Before the founder of modern nursing pioneered the importance of hand-hygiene, most people believed that infections were caused by foul odours. I suppose, after reading this morning's Gospel reading we might say that even Florence Nightingale wasn't the first to point this out; a group of very religious people called the Pharisees were pioneering hand washing 1800 years before Ms Nightingale.

Since then, hand washing is so important that it is not only children that are pedantically encouraged to get in to the habit, adults are as well. For example, go into any hospital and instructions to wash your hands are everywhere. That's okay. After all who would want a surgeon touching you with dirty hands. However, hospitals and surgeries are about the only places where adults are comfortable being told to wash their hands.

Try inviting friends to dinner, and before they sit down take them to the bathroom and tell them to wash their hands; the evening will probably take a turn for the worse.

Adults hate being infantilised and treated like children, which is probably why ritualised hand washing hasn't caught the public's imagination even though, as a public health measure, group, ritualised hand washing at critical points in the day in homes, schools and other places would improve our health no end. Washing our hands is the single most effective way to prevent the spread of some diseases and infections.

Perhaps the feeling that they were being treated like infants was the reason Jesus and his disciples were so outraged at the Pharisees' wagging finger when Jesus and his disciples ate without washing their hands first. Perhaps.

Or perhaps not. Perhaps there was another reason for Jesus' anger. Here, from another text, is a conversation between a doctor and a gentlewoman watching someone else engage in a form of ritualised hand washing.

“What is it she does now? Look how she rubs her hands.”

“It is an accustomed action with her, to seem thus washing her hands. I have known her continue in this a quarter of an hour.”

"Out, damned spot! Out, I say!"

"Foul whisperings are abroad: unnatural deeds do breed unnatural troubles: infected minds to their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets. More needs she the divine than the physician."

No doctor and no amount of hand washing will cure Lady Macbeth of what has infected her mind; she needs divine help.

Ritualised hand washing is not always a sign of good public health; there are times when such rituals are indicative of poor public health. Just ask Duncan, murdered by Macbeth, whose wife went on to suffer from an infected mind displayed by an unnatural trouble.

The doctor in Macbeth wasn't the first to spot hand washing as a sign of a guilty mind; Jesus also did in our reading this morning. In response to the Pharisees hand washing ritual, he quoted a prophet,

"This people pays me lip-service, but their heart is far from me: their worship of me is in vain."

Both the doctor in Macbeth and Jesus in the Gospel of Mark see behind these rituals of hand washing, hypocrisy. If a lack of public hygiene can spread bodily infection publically, then hypocrisy can have a similar affect on the spirit of a public.

At the root of Lady Macbeth's hypocrisy was a deep and sincere attachment to the institution of Kingship - so great that she wanted the crown for her husband and herself - alongside a blatant disregard for the person and life of the king himself.

It is blatant hypocrisy to declare your love for an institution, a movement, or a country, for example, and at the same time have complete disregard for the wellbeing of the people who are part of that institution movement, or country.

Lady Macbeth is not the only person to exhibit such blatant hypocrisy with such poor outcomes for the health of herself and those around her. The Church is guilty of it as well. Most prominently it has been the Church in Pennsylvania in the US, as evidenced by the prominent coverage of sexual abuse there over the past weeks, something many denominations have been guilty of. As are other institutions from football clubs to the BBC to government. But, what is particularly insidious about the Church's guilt is the hypocrisy of it. How can you say you love the body of Christ on earth, and abuse those who are members of that body?

Last week hypocrisy struck close to home in Scotland. How can you say that you love this country so much that you want to lead it to be independent, and at the same time, allegedly, abuse citizens of that country? Abuse is terrible, and hypocrisy undermines hope for its healing or redemption.

David Runciman, an academic teacher of politics at Cambridge University, has a theory about hypocrisy, which he thinks explains why Donald Trump defeated Hilary Clinton at the last US presidential election.

Prof. Runciman argues that Donald Trump campaigned in a way that barely hid the fact that he was a liar. But, the perception of Hilary Clinton amongst many voters was that she is a hypocrite. Many voters believed that she loved much the country's establishment based in Washington, but loved little the voters themselves. Professor Runciman argues that in a straight race between a liar and a hypocrite the liar will always win.

People hate hypocrites that much, and they hate hypocrites, he says, because hypocrites remind us of our childhood when we encountered our first hypocrites, our parents. Parents' first and often most enduring lesson is, 'do as I say, not as I do.'

Hypocrisy makes us feel like children, it infantilises us. We react to it in the same way as we would if our dinner host lined us up outside the bathroom and told us to wash our hands before he or she served the meal.

At the root of Jesus' protest against the Pharisees was a disgust of hypocrisy because it enslaved the people of his day into a paternalistic, infantilising relationship with religious leaders who lorded it over them for their own gain. Jesus said to them,

"You neglect the commandment of God, in order to maintain the tradition of men."

That commandment, which the religious leaders were neglecting was, we know from elsewhere, 'Love your neighbour as you love yourself.'

Today, we are going to perform a ritual; our ritual observance of communion that we do in the same way each time as regular as a ritual every three months. Because it is a ritual, when we celebrate communion we need to be careful that we do not express hypocrisy in our actions. We should be careful we don't infantilise the world around us when we celebrate Communion by demonstrating our love for the institution we are part while patronising the people who make it up.

We should remember that communion is not the expression of a relationship with an institution, the Church, or a particular congregation, St. Ninian's, or a particular place, this building in Corstorphine that we are so attached to. Communion is the expression of a relationship with people.

First and foremost it is an expression of a relationship with God, through the *person* of Jesus Christ, and it is also an expression of a loving relationship with the *people* we share communion with. Communion is about the person of Jesus and the person sitting next to you in the pew. These people are what this is about.

If we remember that then communion becomes meaningful, not just today, but everyday. Being a Christian is about loving people. It is about loving the person of God in Jesus Christ, but it is also about loving the people of the world: it is about finding a way to express love even for our enemies; it is about finding a way to express love even for those who are scarred in deeply antisocial ways because they are victims of some form of abuse; it is about loving those who would certainly condemn us for any hypocrisy, but who would also laugh at us for the sincerity with which we hold our beliefs.

I didn't see Macbeth at the Fringe, although I'm sure there was one in performance. However, I did see an author, an elder in the Church of Scotland, at the Book Festival. He was speaking about his recently published book called *The Minister and the Murder*. His book is an excellent account of the case at the General Assembly in 1984 when the Assembly decided to proceed with an application from someone who was a convicted murderer to enter training for the ministry.

The author does an excellent job in his book of discussing the issues that case gave rise to, issues such as forgiveness and hypocrisy. But, in the course of his talk he mentioned another participant at the Book Festival, a fellow author, Professor Richard Dawkins, the evolutionary biologist, and persuasively articulate evangelical atheist. The author jokingly said he had met Prof Dawkins, and had hoped for a bolt of lightning.

He was joking of course, but it left a bad taste. No surprise, his joke infantilised Prof Dawkins's integrity, beliefs and dignity. Right there in that joke was Pharisaic hypocrisy.

*Now to the one who can keep you from falling and set you in the presence of his glory, jubilant and above reproach, to the only God our saviour, be glory and majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all time, now, and for evermore. Amen.*