

# Heart Religion

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*Mark 7:1–8, 14–23; Song of Songs 2:8–13*

This people honors me with their lips,  
but their hearts are far from me (Mark 7:6).

Words of God given to the prophet Isaiah about 700 years before Christ, quoted here by Jesus in today's gospel reading.

their *hearts* are far from me

How is your heart? Each of us at the centre of our bodies has this wonderful organ that pumps blood all around our body. It starts working while we are in the womb—you can see it on the scan after just a few weeks—and it keeps on pumping day and night, sleeping and waking, every second of our lives, for decades, right up to the day we die. That is amazing enough—who could have put together such a marvellous machine as that, constructed out of human flesh? We are 'fearfully and wonderfully made' (Psalm 139:14). But when the Bible talks about the human heart, it doesn't mean just that. It's referring to something deeper and even more wonderful: our human capacity to love. We do the same thing: we talk about love-hearts, and we say, 'I love you with all my heart'.

What does that mean? If we want to know what that means, we only have to read the Song of Songs in the Old Testament. It is a series of vivid poems celebrating love and marriage between a woman and a man. I put them in that order, because she gets the first and last word! It is very erotic and exciting, but delicate, tender and respectful at the same time. It's worth reading. We read some of it from the Old Testament this morning. As poetry, it uses a lot of picture-language, but this morning's reading doesn't need a lot of imagination to know what the picture-language is getting at:

The voice of my beloved!

Look, he comes,  
leaping upon the mountains,  
bounding over the hills.  
My beloved is like a gazelle  
or a young stag.  
Look, there he stands  
behind our wall,  
gazing in at the windows,  
looking through the lattice

He can't wait to see her! (You may be thinking, 'Poor Martin—he's missing Vivien! Well I am, but I'll be flying home to her tonight—leaping over the mountains!') The woman says:

My beloved speaks and says to me:  
"Arise, my love, my fair one,  
and come away;  
for now the winter is past,  
the rain is over and gone.  
The flowers appear on the earth;  
the time of singing has come,  
and the voice of the turtledove  
is heard in our land.  
The fig tree puts forth its figs,  
and the vines are in blossom;  
they give forth fragrance.  
Arise, my love, my fair one,  
and come away" (Song 2:8-13).

You know what time of the year he's talking about, don't you? Spring started yesterday—so we'd better watch out! Does it surprise you to find that in the Bible? There is no aspect of human life that is not covered in the Bible. Obviously this is specifically about the love of a woman with a man and a man with a woman—very down-to-earth. But it ends up making a general observation about the unstoppable power of love:

love is strong as death,  
passion fierce as the grave.  
Its flashes are flashes of fire,  
a raging flame.  
Many waters cannot quench love,

neither can floods drown it (Song 8:6–7).

Powerful stuff. And because in the Bible God regards himself as the husband of his people, and the church is regarded as the bride of Christ (see Jer. 31:31–32; Hosea 2:14–16; Eph. 5:25–32), and that's what marriage between a woman and a man points to and signifies, then these love songs have also been taken as descriptive of our love-relationship with God, and the church's love-relationship with Jesus Christ. Does that surprise you, I wonder? That our love-relationship with God should have that passionate fiery quality? Why not? In our prayer book the daily service of Morning Prayer has these words:

As we rejoice in the gift of this new day,  
so may the light of your presence, O God,  
set our hearts on fire with love for you;  
now and for ever (APBA p. 384).

Is that a bit exaggerated do you think? Taking it a too far? Well, when you're out camping, you don't need a very big fire to boil the billy for a morning cup of tea, but the fire needs to be hot enough. No more luke-warm religion here!

Our human capacity to love is central to the Christian religion. The two great commandments that we have been given as human beings are to love God with all our heart, and mind and strength—body, mind and spirit—and to love each other as we would love ourselves. So—how's your heart? How is your capacity to love?

When we are dealing with the human heart, we need to tread very carefully, and gently, and with great respect. We human beings are creatures made in the image of God. In the image of **God!** Psalm 92 says of God, 'How great are your works, O LORD! Your thoughts are very deep!' (Psa. 92:5). If that is how God is, and we are made in God's image, then it is hardly surprising to find in Psalm 64: 'the *human* heart and mind are deep' (Psa. 64:6). It is a high, and noble, and profound calling, to be a human person, to be made in the image of God, made to participate with God in God's great works. God's deep thoughts are all pure and strong righteousness-in-action, through and through. And

that's what we've been given deep hearts and minds for—to be in that all-righteous action with God, to be big enough to be able to handle all of that! We are indeed 'fearfully and wonderfully made', often more than we could ever expect or imagine. Look around you, at the amazing creatures that are sitting in this church right now. Look in the mirror! And say, 'fearfully and wonderfully made'!

And that is why some of the Puritan divines—great teachers of the church—used to say: Don't ever meddle with someone else's heart. How can any of us really know or judge what is going on in another person's heart? Don't even attempt it—leave that to God.

Because there is one who does see right into our heart, and plumbs its depths, and we acknowledge that right at the beginning of our service:

Almighty God,  
to whom all hearts are open,  
all desires known,  
and from whom no secrets are hidden.

And, as we said last week, Jesus had an uncanny ability to be able to suss out what is going on inside a person—he had that gift of discernment by the Holy Spirit (see 1 Cor. 12:10)—a kind of spiritual x-ray vision that could see directly into people's hearts and lives. Maybe he's doing that with us now. He could look at Nathanael, one of his disciples, before he'd even met him, and could say, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' (John 1:47)—in other words, he has a good pure heart. Jesus may be looking at some of us here this morning, and may be saying just the same thing.

But there were some hearts that Jesus looked into where he didn't find that goodness. And these were the hearts that God prophesied about through Isaiah: 'their hearts are far from me'—and they were the very people who were in front of Jesus when he quoted that, who were questioning and criticising Jesus and his disciples.

When do our hearts get far from God? Our hearts are far from God when we have stopped loving God, and have started to love other

things instead of God. Our hearts are far from God when we have put ourselves and our own desires first, which is the complete opposite of what God does, and when we are loving ourselves more than we love God or other people. And the Bible says we've all done that, pretty much from the beginning.

What happens to our hearts, to our capacity to love, when our hearts are far from God? When we set our hearts towards evil purposes, in the opposite direction to where we have been made to go, then because the human heart and mind are so very deep, there will be then no end to our evil, and the harm we are capable of will be immense. So God says in Jeremiah, 'The heart is devious above all else; it is corrupt, it is perverse—who can understand it?' (Jer. 17:9 RSV and NRSV). And when Psalm 64 is talking about the human heart and mind being very deep, it is in the context of 'the scheming of evil-doers', who 'hold fast to their evil purpose', and think they can get away with it, saying, 'Who can see us?' (Psa. 64:2, 5).

But we know there is One who does see. Who does see everything: 'Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden . . .' And when Jesus with his spiritual x-ray vision looks into the human heart when it is far from God, what does he see there?

It's not pretty. We heard Jesus say in the gospel reading: 'it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness' (Mark 7:21–22). And he says, 'All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person' (Mark 7:23). Do they ever. This is never what the human heart was meant to be full of. We have hearts that have been made to be full of God's righteousness and love, but if we turn our hearts away from God, then they will be filled with everything else, amounting to wickedness and hatred. Unclean defilement.

So we shouldn't be surprised when we see stuff coming out of our own hearts that we'd rather not own up to. Sudden immoral or adulterous thoughts. Greediness. Self-preferment. Big or little untruths. Or just plain silliness. And plenty more. Jesus told us that's what's there, and that's what comes out. But that's not where Jesus left us, wallowing in that.

He didn't say, Try and fix it yourselves. That's what the Pharisees and scribes, whom Jesus was talking to, were trying to do. When we have that uneasy sense of unsatisfactory uncleanness inside, we'll often try all sorts of outward things to try to make it right—little habits and rituals. The Pharisees had elaborate hand-washing rituals—it was over the top, whether they needed to or not—as if washing over the outside could somehow make them more pure on the inside. And they thought if they ate only the right things, that would make them right inside. And Jesus said that everything you eat just goes through you and out into the toilet. Yes, Jesus talked about going to the toilet, which is something we all do every day. What did I say about the Bible covering every aspect of human life?

The Pharisees got a lot of these ritual things from God's law in the Old Testament, but they carried them to extremes, to try and be on the safe side. And they looked to these practices as such, in themselves, to be the things that made them right with God. Whereas in God's Old Testament law these things were all little pointers to what He was going to do to make us right with himself through Jesus—to make us fit to be with.

A great cleansing happened when Jesus took our sins into himself and died on the cross. In the prophecy of Ezekiel God had promised, 'I will give you a new heart': 'I will remove from your body the heart of stone'—cold and incapable of loving—'and give you a heart of flesh'—warm, throbbing, and alive—'and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses' (Ezek. 36:25–26). How about that? Jesus said, 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God' (Matt. 5:8). He can't have meant those who have kept their hearts pure, because none of us have

done that. So he must have meant, Blessed are the *purified* in heart—those who have got a new cleansed heart from God. So if Jesus is looking at each of us here this morning, and saying, ‘There is someone with a good pure heart’, that is not something we have got for ourselves, that is something he has got for us. How does the prayer go that we start our service with?

Almighty God,  
to whom all hearts are open,  
all desires known,  
and from whom no secrets are hidden:  
*cleanse* the thoughts of our hearts  
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,  
that we may perfectly *love* you!

And that’s what God does, so we can.