

Sermon – 14/05/2006 pm

Holiness and Cleanliness

Study Text: Deuteronomy 23:1-14

Some of us were taught in our youth that ‘cleanliness is next to godliness’. Passages like the one before us in Deuteronomy 23 may well have given rise to this saying. We do not hear this saying so much these days, probably because people are ignorant or afraid of godliness. Our society continues to operate in the shadow of such teaching – but cracks are beginning to emerge.

Among others things spitting seems to be on the increase. I remember as a youth that the town hall where I lived had spittoons around the walls. But for decades such things have not existed. Now however, you have to be careful in certain parts of our city of people spitting; just like I had to be very careful in India cycling past a bus with open windows. Oh yes science tells us why we need to practice cleanliness but there is more to it than just science.

Along with morality, cleanliness is closely linked to godliness. The god people serve influences their ideas about hygiene. Not all gods teach hygiene the way we have in this passage of Scripture before us. I remember a missionary lady deriding an Indian man on the basis of this word of the Lord through Moses regarding sanitation in the camp. ‘At least take a spade with you when you go out to the field in the morning’ she told him.

You dare not wander from the track when you are traversing such fields. ‘Latrines in India’ quipped one visitor – ‘the whole place is a latrine’. Hundreds of thousands of latrines have been built for the people by the government and non-government organisations but few are used – except to store pumpkins or the like! Instructed by idols of wood and stone they know little about hygiene, and even less about holiness.

Holiness is a fundamental attribute of the God of Israel, the same God whom we serve through Jesus Christ. Because he is holy he commands his people to be holy also (Leviticus 19:2). This holiness is reflected in purity of life and worship. Hence the command excluding certain people from the assembly of the Lord, and the command to keep the camp clean.

Exclusion from the Assembly

For the first time in Deuteronomy the full expression *the assembly* (or congregation) *of the Lord* is used by Moses. These were the covenant people of God, a special people, a holy nation. The Hebrew word translated ‘assembly’ is translated in the Greek (the LXX) as *ecclesia*, from which we get ‘ecclesiastical’. *Ecclesia* is then translated as ‘church’ in the New Testament. Church is the assembly of the people of God. It is not a building. *Where two or three are gathered together in my name there I am in the midst of them* says the Lord (Matthew 18:20).

Anyone of illegitimate birth, along with people from a couple of racial groups, was excluded permanently from the assembly of the Lord. Ten is the number for completeness in the Bible, so the tenth generation indicates completely or for ever. At first sight these exclusions may

appear unfair, but they must be understood in their historical setting. The reason for excluding the Ammonites and Moabites is outlined in the passage.

The first group refused to sell supplies to the people of God as they passed by on their way to the Promised Land. The other group went to the effort of hiring a prophet to curse the people of God. God turned Balaam's curse into a blessing and in fact the Moabites themselves came under the curse of God. Just as the Lord said to Abraham, *I will curse him who curses you* (Genesis 12). Israel was never to enter into a peace treaty with the Moabites.

In this context we should note that both Moab and Ammon were of incestuous birth. They were the sons of Lot by his two daughters (Genesis 19). Some Jewish scholars regard the illegitimacy of verse 2 as being the result of incest. But others see it as the result of temple prostitution. Such a practice was widespread in Canaan and other nations, but was forbidden in Israel (23:17). Children of ritual prostitution may well have been dedicated to pagan deities, thereby excluding them from the assembly of the people of God.

Emasculation was also a practice associated with pagan worship. Men who were ritually castrated were excluded from the assembly (23:1). In a later age we find eunuchs who were faithful to the covenant were given a place in the family of God (Isaiah 56:3, Acts 8).

To make it clear that not all foreigners, nor all who had a deformity for that matter, were excluded from the assembly, Moses identified the Edomites and the Egyptians among those not to be abhorred or regarded as an abomination in the assembly. Edom or Esau was the brother of Jacob. But what about the Egyptians who had kept the people in slavery and treated them harshly? This however was only in the latter years. Initially Joseph and his family were treated well. They were given refuge and treated well when famine devastated their own land.

The assembly or the church is a holy assembly. It is for people the Lord declares to be holy. It is not a place for those who disregard the requirements of God as set forth in the Scriptures. It is not a place in which men are free to impose their own standards or regulations. God has declared who is to be permitted and who is to be excluded from the church. Christ is the head of the church and his word must be adhered to not that of man.

Cleanliness

After setting the scene of an army going out to war, Moses gave two commands to be followed in the camp. The commands did not relate to battle procedure – such matters were dealt with previously. This time it was matters of hygiene within the camp.

Firstly the occurrence in the night. This is different to the 'nocturnal emission' of Leviticus 15:16. It had been interpreted in different ways but in all likelihood it simply refers to urination. In the middle of the night no one likes to get up and wander too far to relieve themselves. Some may not even make it out of bed. Such a person was to remain outside the camp until undergoing ritual purification in the evening.

Secondly with regard to defecation they were to go to a place outside the camp, taking with them a spade to dig a hole and cover their refuse. How I wish such practices had been adhered to in some places that I visited!

What was the basis for such rules of hygiene? Today we know how deadly diseases can be transmitted in human waste, but did they know this over 3000 years ago? Probably not; but God did. The Creator God knows all things. Even today we do not know everything – though some like to think that we do. They think that science tells us everything and that we have no need of God. But is it not true that the Creator knows more than man, more than the medical experts. Who will you believe when man's so called knowledge conflicts with the word of God?

It was not only for health reasons that Moses gave these commands. *The Lord your God walks in the midst of your camp...therefore your camp shall be holy (23:14)*. They often carried the Ark of the Covenant, the visible sign of the presence of God, with them into battle. The Lord went into battle with them and gave them victory. Cleanliness was to mark the camp, the camp in which the holy God dwelt among his holy people.

In closing I want to tell you briefly of the conversion of a person we knew in India. She was a poor, illiterate village lady when she heard the gospel and believed in Jesus Christ. She lived in a single room mud hut with her husband and four children. What happened after she was saved? She still lived in the same house in the same village. She still had the same amount of money. She still had the same clothes to wear. But she looked like a new person (indeed she was as a born again child of God). She looked different because she washed her hair and her clothes, and did the same for her children on a regular basis. And she always combed her hair. At her request we helped her build a latrine in her backyard.

Cleanliness is next to godliness when your God is the Father of Jesus Christ our Lord. Cleanliness should be a mark of all God's people and the places where they dwell.

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