



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"Monitoring the Heart."**
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Deuteronomy 4: 1-9
Second Reading Ephesians 6: 10-20
Gospel Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

One of the most common things I see when I visit seriously ill people in the hospital is the heart monitor. Its familiar little green line and reassuring bleeps give the assurance that the person I visit is still going strong, and any major fluctuation immediately brings nurses and doctors running. Today's readings, believe it or not, have something to do with a similar monitor: the maintenance of one's spiritual heart and its health.

People often think that the biggest difference between our Anglican-Episcopal tradition and the Roman Catholic Church is rules: the Catholics can't do this and must do that, while we are blissfully free to pretty much do what we want. It is even tempting for the clergy to cash in on this opinion, especially when dealing with potential newcomers who claim to be disillusioned with the Roman Church because of its policies. I'm afraid I have to tell you that much of the imagined leniency of our Church is just that: imagined. There are rules and there are expectations. They come from Scripture and from the Holy Spirit, but they are not meant to break our spirits, but to lead us to God.

Jesus is not famous for laying down rules. He is often cited as the example of someone who bent, stretched or even broke the religious laws of his day. Take today's story from the Gospel of Mark, for example. People notice that Jesus' disciples are not being very "kosher", that is, not following the regulations about ritual cleanness before eating. We don't know quite why this is so because Jesus doesn't really address the issue per se. We know, for example, that Jesus usually followed the religious customs of his people pretty closely. What he does in this case is typical of his style: he doesn't get stuck in the details, but turns on the hypocrisy of his critics. "This people honors me only with lip-service," he quotes. And then he gives a list of things that come from inside a person and defile him much more than ignoring some particular rule about ritual purity.

Few of us here at Holy Trinity are concerned about the fine points of church ritual. I and the rest of the clergy probably have to be, but few others: we have to make sure that the worship here is decent, orderly, accurate and conducive. But there is more to ritual than the way the service is conducted, and ritual purity of a sort can infect the laity too. Insisting on always sitting in the same pew and resenting anyone who takes your place: that's a ritual act. Always speaking to the same people after church and not including visitors or newcomers: that's a ritual act. Deciding that you're never going to change your ideas about God, Jesus, the Church, the Sunday service, the hymns we sing, and the coffee we serve afterwards: those are all ritual acts, too.

Ritual and ceremony have their important place: they are there to help us stay focused on the Gospel and on the person of Jesus. I don't care how ancient a ceremony is, or how theatrically beautiful and exciting it might be- if it doesn't help to bring us towards God and his will for it, it runs the real risk of becoming idolatry- something that is worshiped for its own sake, not as a vehicle towards God.

The essential things are the heart, the purity of one's conscience, and one's commitment to God first and foremost. What we do in the name of our religion is meant to involve offering our whole existence to God, and to help people find him. Things that become hurdles to jump over, or worse, things to scare people away are the kind of thing that Jesus condemns in today's Gospel. He does so because getting

hung up on less-than-important details can show that one's heart is not in the right place.

The point of the heart monitor is to make sure that the old ticker is still working correctly. The point of coming to church and participating in worship is pretty much the same: making sure that our heart stays in the right place, is working efficiently, and is pumping the life blood to the rest of the body. How well is yours working? How long has it been since you checked to see if it is in the right place?