

Blind Guides of the Blind

05/08/2009

'Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind, and if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit'. (Matthew 15: 14)

This is said in the context of the Scribes and the Pharisees coming to Jesus and asking 'Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat'. (v2)

In the picture 'The Parable of the Blind' painted by Bruegel the Elder in 1568 a group of blind men, each grabbing on to the next, marches in a grim diagonal towards the lower right hand corner, where one of them has sprawled into a ditch. This is what Jesus foresaw for the Scribes and Pharisees and the picture bristles with rank and smellable detail from the begging bowl at one man's waist to the orbless, accusing eyes that another turns on us, in pleading or rebuke, 'See, if you can still see, where blindness will lead', the look on the face says.

What is the blindness of the Scribes and Pharisees about? It is not simply about whether to wash hands or not. The Scribes and Pharisees are absolutely identified with a system of misrecognition (equals blindness) which fails to see that beyond the purity/impurity distinction a much greater uncleanness is hidden: 'for out of the heart comes evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander' (v19).

However, purity is an important religious idea. Rules of ritual purity keep people in their 'proper' place. Without purity regulations there would be a crisis of distinctions – the difference between the sacred and profane would collapse. Therefore those who are out of their 'proper' place are dangerous and the safety of the community requires the maintenance of the purity/impurity distinction. And a purity/impurity distinction requires an insider/outsider distinction as well and a willingness to enforce the distinction. The custodians of the sacred distinctions – the Scribes and Pharisees – are blind to really important things, and they blind those who they claim to be leading. Jesus signals an end to a world of sacred distinctions, and he is a profound threat to the custodians of sacred distinctions. The world of blindness is close to violence, and it will only become obvious when it is challenged.

Being blind in terms of the text is a moral condition and it is an inability to see what is really important. What is being suggested is that it can affect whole societies, and particularly the guardians of their 'sacreds'. In our western societies, one of the 'sacreds' is money – as Marx clearly saw. We have a society that uses money to mark individuals in terms of success and status. This is how we make distinctions between people. This is our purity/impurity distinction. Money mystifies and requires contemporary scribes and pharisees to maintain the mysteries. The current financial crisis suggests that we have all (or most of us) been blind, and that there have been blind guides of the blind. The issue is: how deep is the pit?

David Stevens