“For it is from within, from the human heart…..”

Do you know the story of the car that didn’t like vanilla ice-cream?

The story goes that in the early 1970’s General Motors received a letter from a customer who claimed his car didn’t like vanilla ice-cream. They thought it was crazy so they ignored it. But the customer wrote again.

“I know this sounds crazy but it’s true. My new Pontiac doesn’t like vanilla ice cream. It is a family tradition to have ice-cream each evening, so I drive down to the store to buy it. If I buy vanilla the car won’t start. If I buy anything else it is fine.”

The board of General Motors still thought it was crazy but they sent an engineer to investigate. The engineer accompanied the owner to the store, he bought vanilla ice-cream. The car wouldn’t start.

The next night the engineer went again. The owner bought chocolate ice-cream, the car started perfectly. The next night it was mint, the car started fine. The next night vanilla, the car refused to start.

The engineer explored things further. He accompanied the owner into the store. When he bought chocolate ice-cream, or mint, raspberry ripple, the storekeeper went into the back of the store to fetch the flavour for that evening. But when it was vanilla, the most common flavour chosen, the ice-cream was kept in a freezer right by the counter.

Problem solved.

You will have course seen what the issue was?

The vanilla ice-cream was kept by the counter, all the other flavours were in a freezer in the back store room. It took longer to get the flavoured ice-creams than the vanilla. The car’s fuel pipe was slightly too close to the exhaust, so with a hot exhaust the fuel in the pipe formed a vapour lock and the car wouldn’t start. With a slightly longer wait the exhaust was cooler, no vapour lock, so the car started perfectly.

That story is told in many settings to do with management, customer service, and looking after personnel – because it is about attitude. The engineer didn’t dismiss the car owner’s problem. It sounded crazy but it wasn’t. He looked and he listened, and he solved the problem. Approach people with the right attitude and better outcomes ensue.

This is pretty much the same thing as Jesus is saying when he speaks of what comes from within. Our capacity for good or bad, our treatment of others, our view of ourselves, comes from within. We have to take responsibility for it.

When I was at college we were invited to the Ministry of Defence as part of a course we were following. We were ushered into a room where to our surprise we found ourselves face to face with Michael Heseltine, Secretary of State for Defence. It was quite late in the day and his aide told us he had an important engagement so we wouldn’t get long.

He proved to be a most gracious and charming host and listened far more than he spoke. The meeting went on and the aide was making increasingly frantic gestures that the Secretary of State had somewhere far more important to be.

Eventually he played the ultimate card – he leant over and said in a whisper loud enough for everyone to hear – “Sir, you wife is on the phone.” To which Michael Heseltine replied – “Thank you. Please let her know I’m in a very important meeting and I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

And then he gave us full attention for a further half an hour. We left with a very clear impression that here was a man of integrity and honour, a public servant who could be trusted to put the national interest before personal ambition. It came from within. Some would say he’s the best Prime Ministers this country never had.

We might be tempted to be critical of the Pharisees and Scribes for nit picking rules, but then rules which say you should wash your hands after shopping, or wash cooking utensils carefully, are not entirely silly.

Nor is the concept that sometimes rules need to be enforced for people’s own good. The rules about not working on the Sabbath protected a day when people could not be at work. Many of those working from home during lockdown have found the boundaries between work and personal time have been difficult to manage. Many have struggled with mental health as a result of never switching off.

The French have laws that forbid sending emails out of work hours. These laws have the same intention as enforcing the Sabbath. Setting clear boundaries that make people take time off is a sensible thing to do. I have scolded more than one bishop for setting a bad example by failing to take a regular day off. I am pleased our new bishop has a hobby, he rides motorbikes, and tomorrow, with the Bishop of Hereford we’re riding from Chester Cathedral to Hereford Cathedral. You may want to avoid the A49.

Rules aren’t the problem. The problem is how we use them, and that primarily depends on what comes from within. One of the sad things during lockdown was how many people took the rules and turned themselves into tinpot dictators. Do you remember people walking being pursued by drones, or the lady who had a coffee being charged by police for holding a picnic? And churches weren’t immune from such silliness, funeral directors have told me how badly they have seen people treated trying to mourn under such difficult circumstances.

We’ve all encountered people who have taken a sensible precaution and then used it to boost their own power and ego. That also comes from within.

One of the Psalm set for this day is Psalm 45, which begins, “My heart is astir with gracious words.”

The mark of a faithful person is their heart, whether it be gracious, kind, generous, resilient, or judgemental, harsh, or mean.

If someone tells you their car doesn’t like vanilla ice-cream you may jump to the conclusion they are crazy, a person not worth listening to, a problem to be avoided. Or your heart may be astir with gracious words, and a problem can be fixed.

In the week ahead, be ready to listen, be aware of what comes from within.