

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 31 Year A 2017

This past week a somewhat significant anniversary may have passed you by: the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther issuing his 95 theses against the sale of indulgences and thus igniting the Protestant Reformation and the firestorm that engulfed Europe – and the rest of the world – and whose impact is still being felt today. As fuel for their criticism against a corrupt church, the reformers would latch onto texts such as we hear in the Gospel today. Tom Wright, former bishop of Durham and Biblical commentator, has written that “*Generations of preachers have used this passage to criticize church leaders who like dressing up and being seen in public.*” As followers of Jesus we cannot dismiss any of his words. Everything recorded in the gospels we must take with utmost seriousness, even if they make us a little uncomfortable...

But the gospel we encounter today is about more than fancy clothes and good seats and other honours and privileges. Jesus criticizes the Pharisees because they didn't practice what they preached; they didn't live out what they taught. While Jesus' rebuke seems general, as though all scribes and Pharisees were guilty of love of prestige and honour, we know the rabbis themselves condemned such behaviour. And we know that leaders of every generation – second temple Judaism, the early church, the church through the ages, and the church today – have not always lived out their vocations in congruence with the values of the gospel.

So, what's going on here? Well, Jesus has just completed a series of run-ins with the different factional leaders of Judaism - Pharisees, and Herodians and Sadducees. And this in the context of holy week: Jesus having entered Jerusalem, turned over the money tables and with his impending passion closing in. So, there is a sense of urgency. Jesus here is really doing a Martin Luther kind of thing: just laying out everything that's wrong with the dominant form of religion. But Jesus now turns from addressing those factional leaders - his confrontations with them – to address (as we hear today) the crowds and his disciples. So, even though the critique today is directed against the Pharisees, they are not the real audience. Instead, addresses the disciples and, by extension, us...

Now, many Christians see the Pharisees as the “bad guys,” in the gospels. But that's not exactly true or fair, really. The Pharisees were originally a ‘holiness movement’. They sought to make the love of God and love of neighbour the chief commandments,. They recognised that this was the essence of the Torah, and it was from this essence – this heart of the law - from which all else flowed (which sounds quite a bit like Jesus himself, doesn't it?). The Pharisees were concerned about preserving Jewish religious and cultural life in the midst of Hellenistic Roman society, and so they emphasized the laws concerning food, purity, and group practices. These practices served to keep Jews united to one another and distinct from pagan Roman culture. They were simply mindful how the pagan culture pushed hard against Jewish self-identity. So, their culture and their faith wasn't lost under the pressure from the Romans they insisted on these practices to preserve their identity. Kind of what happens in certain Jewish parts of St Kilda!

But many Pharisees of Jesus' time went one step further to make their way of life even more distinctive. They drew on an old tradition of using the *priestly* laws concerning purity and applied to themselves. So, the Pharisees with whom Jesus contends attempted to keep themselves in a state of ritual purity at all times as would a priest in the Temple. They were scrupulous in their behaviour and took great care not to come in contact with any source of defilement, creating an isolationist, separatist sect.

In the gospel placed before us today, Jesus is not criticizing those who try faithfully to keep the Law. In the Gospel of Matthew, we hear Jesus speak of the Torah as good and God-given. But what we find Jesus addressing is those who forget what really mattered about the law: loving God and loving your neighbour. Because the Pharisees were so busy trying to be pure, they had cut themselves off from a lot of the ickiness of life. But Jesus wants to remind us of the big things: justice and mercy and faithfulness. He is speaking to the experts, the ones who were so good at telling other people what they should be doing. And he is speaking to those who work really hard at keeping the letter of the law while forgetting about the spirit of the law.

When Jesus says that they “sit on Moses’ seat,” he is, in effect, saying that these religious leaders have legitimate authority. Jesus never denounces the Law, the Torah, or the traditions of Israel. Jesus is holding his listeners accountable to the Law. What Jesus is doing is lambasting these religious authorities for being too showy with the public expression of their faith. It is not that their phylacteries are wrong to wear; it’s that they have made a prayer shawl into an article of bragging.

After critiquing the Pharisees and scribes for their showy spirituality, Jesus then goes on to say that we should recognize no rabbi, father, or teacher except Christ. This is not to be taken literally, but it is to be taken seriously. Of course, we all have fathers and teachers. But once more Jesus is directing us to the bigger picture, the wider horizon, so we have a proper understanding of where we stand in the grand scheme of things.

Here, Jesus is making a claim very much like the one that God made on Mount Sinai when he delivered the Ten Commandments to Moses. The first commandment was: you shall have no other gods before me. Jesus is reminding us here that God expects us to trust him, solely and totally. Jesus is reminding us that we all have the inclination within us to look around and try to make something complete us; but so often our hearts set on idols, things of our own making. Things can never complete us. Other people can’t complete us – that’s to make an idol of them as well! We oughtn’t burden our spouses, our partners, our parents, our children with the idea that they might ‘complete us.’ Because they cannot be God for us; only God can be God! It is God who is the source of our happiness, satisfaction, and hope.

This is precisely what Jesus is saying to us today. There’s only one father, there is only one rabbi, and there is only one teacher who is the true and proper focus of our lives. Of course, recognizing that there is only one God, one father, and one teacher is easier said than done. We would all know the struggle – the battle – in our own hearts and lives to put all of our faith, hope, and trust in God and God alone. All the saints before us have always put this kind of faith into terms dealing with trust. To give over our whole lives, to dare allow God be God in our lives, is an act of trust. We don’t know what it will mean for us, what the radical implications will be.

Trusting God is hard. But as followers of Jesus we look to Him and see that indeed it is the path to life. It simply isn’t enough for us to be admirers of Christ, we need to be disciples. Lots of people admire Jesus. They much rather him than his religion! But admiring him doesn’t cost anything. It doesn’t change hearts. Admiring Jesus keeps him at a distance, in the same way the Pharisees just got caught up – stuck – in external observances. We become disciples by having one God, one teacher, and following him first. Our trust in God won’t allow us to settle for the surface of things it will change us. And it will drive us to deeper and deeper love for ourselves, our neighbours, and most importantly, for our God. Amen.