

## Pride and pretence

I think the greatest criticism levelled by non-Christians of Christians is that they're hypocrites. That they say one thing and do another. It's not a criticism of the Christian faith as such, but of Christians individually and collectively. I think it's true that we often find ourselves saying one thing and doing another. How many times have you heard someone say "... And he calls himself a Christian?", or "that's not a very Christian thing to do".

In today's reading, Jesus warns us about hypocrisy, but Jesus doesn't tell us simply to avoid hypocrisy or to denounce hypocrites, instead he tells us the dangers of hypocrisy and how we should deal with hypocrites.

The reading itself comes at a key point in Matthew's gospel. It is the last time Jesus teaches publicly before his death. It follows the hammering of Jesus with a series of questions from the Jewish religious leaders – from the priests, the scribes, the Sadducees and the Pharisees. They attacked him with trick questions and loaded questions, they were trying to catch him out and trying to entrap him.

But Jesus stood his ground. He faithfully answered the questions, with wisdom and with scripture, and with an understanding that confounded the questioners.

The time for answering the questions was over. We heard last week at the end of Matthew chapter 22 "from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions." (22:46b). So Jesus turned away from the Pharisees, and turned to the crowds and to his disciples...

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach." (23:1-3)

Jesus has he's gone from talking to the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, to talking about them. And he tells his followers about the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders, "do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach".

Don't follow their example.

But despite highlighting their hypocrisy, he still tells the disciples and the crowd to listen to them "So you must be careful to do everything they tell you".

That's not the way of the world, is it? Once hypocrisy is exposed, people stop listening to the hypocrite, don't they?

But the teachers of the law and the Pharisees are a special case, says Jesus, because "they sit in Moses' seat". The Jewish tradition is that the teacher, the rabbi, sits down to teach. (By contrast we have the tradition of standing to preach, perhaps because it helps keep sermons to a more reasonable length).

When they are in the seat of Moses, they are teaching as Moses did. Delivering the Ten Commandments from God for instance, bringing the first five books of the bible – "The Law" to the people. The phrase "in Moses' seat" is a way of saying "teaching consistently with Moses' teaching". Or I guess more broadly "teaching in accordance with scripture".

And so it is for us today – no matter what the sins of the preacher may be, no matter how hypocritical he or she may be – if his or her teaching is in accordance with scripture, then we need to listen. And so it's a great thing that we have bibles in a language we can read. And it's a great thing

that we have a tradition of the interpretation of scripture that we can draw on. And it's a great thing that we can draw on our own human experiences and logic as we read the scriptures and hear them preached.

The problem with the teachers of the law and the Pharisees doesn't arise when they're teaching from the seat of Moses: it arises when they're not.

Jesus tells us that they tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. (23:4)

So often, I think, we push other people down so that we can raise ourselves a little bit higher. We put burdens on others, so that we can get ahead. We make others jump through hoops that we don't think we need to.

The Jewish Law had become like that – it had developed from the law that Moses knew, with each generation adding a bit more interpretation, a bit more detail, another safeguard. With good intentions, initially, but the law had become so complex that only a scholar could know all its ins and outs.

The commandments that had been given to the nation of Israel at Sinai, to set the nation apart as the people of God, but by Jesus time it had been used as the basis of a religious legal system that kept the elite in power, and the common people oppressed.

Of course, nothing similar would happen today, would it?

And it's not just burdening other people with rules they choose not to follow, hypocrisy, that they're guilty of, but it's pride as well:

“Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others”. (23:5-7)

The phylactery (or the tefillin) is a leather box, which contains parchment inscribed with verses of scripture which is tied to a Jewish person's forehead and left arm – in accordance with Deuteronomy 6:8.

And Numbers (15:38) tells us of the command that they should keep tassels on their garments, so the tassels would be reminder of the commands of the Lord.

Both the phylacteries and the tassels were good things, ordained by God to remind the Jewish people of his saving grace, but they'd taken a good idea to an extreme: If a phylactery was good, so they considered, then a bigger phylactery was better. If we should have tassels on our garments, then it must please God more if our tassels are longer, right?

Again, nothing similar would happen today, would it?

It's nice to be respected. It's nice to have the best seats reserved. But as teachers of the law, as Pharisees, they should not have been claiming 'honour' for themselves.

And not only that, says Jesus “they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others. But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers.” (23:7-8)

It's not people showing rabbis respect which is the issue - it is their pride! Jesus says "they love to be greeted with respect... and to be called Rabbi" It isn't people calling them Rabbi which is the issue, it's the pleasure they get from it.

Instead, Jesus tells the crowd – and probably particularly the disciples – that they are not to be called "Rabbi" because Jesus is the Teacher (and rabbi means teacher), and they are all brothers. Or to use more inclusive language, they are all equals.

In verse 9, Jesus tells us: "And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven." And there are people who will jump on this verse, and launch into a tirade against the Roman Catholic Church, because they call priests 'father' – and for that matter so do some Anglicans, most of the eastern orthodox churches and a few others.

But it doesn't particularly seem that this is what Jesus is talking about here, and we do have several great traditions which reconcile their own customs of address with this verse without issue. The key to understanding these verses is, I think, that the use of such titles could be used, not only elevate the importance of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, but it could effectively drag down regard for God. If that Pharisee is a father, and that scribe's a father – and that bloke over there's a father too it's so easy to start regarding our Father in heaven as just another father.

And Jesus continues, "Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah." (23:10) And he really harks back to the beginning of this reading – a warning about hypocrisy and about pride. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sat in the seat of Moses and should be listened to when they spoke in accordance with the scriptures – not simply because of the title or status they'd acquired. No matter how learned or respected or wise we may be, we must not elevate ourselves – or each other – over our saviour.

No matter how knowledgeable or eloquent or passionate a minister or preacher is, they're not going to save us. Only Jesus is. They're not the source of inspiration, no matter how inspiring their words are. Only the Holy Spirit is.

Those who lead and those who preach, lead and preach by the grace of God, and only by the grace of God.

Don't rely just on what I or others tell you about God, whether it's from this lectern or elsewhere. But instead, test what we tell you against what the bible – does it match? Test it against what others have said – if it's different, why is it different? Test it against your experience of God – is it consistent? And finally, test it against your logic – does it make sense?

Jesus tells the crowd in verse 11 that "The greatest among you will be your servant." And what a profound statement that is. In our context we can understand it in all those acts of service that happen behind the scenes to keep our churches running and bind our communities together. People who help one another, people who prepare morning tea, people who play music, people who run PowerPoints, people who maintain our buildings and facilities and people who pay our bills. People who serve the church - people who serve the gospel.

But we can also take that verse as Jesus talking about himself "The greatest among you must be your servant." We talk about – and sing about Jesus as *the servant king*. In Paul's letter to the Philippians, we read:

...he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death - even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:7-8)

Jesus was the greatest among them, and yet he was their servant. Rather than piling heavy burdens on people's shoulders like the scribes and the Pharisees, Jesus relieves people of their burdens – he said "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened [...] For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt 11:28-30)

And he was their saviour. And he is our saviour

For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted (23:12).

Once again, Jesus is talking about us, and also talking about himself. When we turn to God in repentance, when we humble ourselves before him, we are lifted up into eternal life in him.

And so it is to with Jesus: Paul tells us in Philippians (2:9-11)

[because he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death,] God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name.

And so we need to, just as Jesus did, humble ourselves in the face of the world. We are sinful people and in need of forgiveness just as the rest of the world is – but, if we have turned to Christ, then we have found that forgiveness.

And in that forgiveness, let's be humble. Let's not boast of our Christian service or our giving or our compassion to others. Let's take away the hypocrisy people would criticise us for. Let's live as Jesus would have us live. Whether it's being generous with our time or cheerfully greeting people who come to Church, or being honest in all our dealings and not taking advantage of our positions, or praying for our enemies, or whatever it is.

In all things, let's practice what we preach!

Remembering always that we are saved by Jesus' resurrection, who has been exalted to the highest place and given the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Amen.