

Matthew 23: 1-12; 23-28; Luke 13: 10-17

Hypocrisy

Hypocrisy – Simulation of virtue or goodness; pretence.

Gk. Hupokrites - actor/ hupokrisis – acting of a part/ hupokrinomai – to decide or judge.

All of us, at some point, practice hypocrisy. We all act a part. Perhaps we do this to save face, or to save somebody else's feelings. We are all culpable of making judgements; assessment, categorisation, acknowledgment of difference – a person belongs here or there – is a way of processing the world around us. Judgement can be a way of weighing up danger or attack on personal safety, or it can be the prelude to wanting to know more about someone and an attempt to try and approach that person with some kind of empathy. In terms of safeguarding, decisions/judgements are made about whether a person is or is not suitable for a particular role. So, it might be argued that there is a place for judgement and decision and perhaps a place where it is necessary to play a part. Jesus mentions hypocrisy in the context of the practice of the Scribes and the Pharisees.

The Pharisees and Scribes are obsessed with keeping the whole corpus of the law, including all the itchy-bitsy ceremonial laws. They are fastidious and pedantic. In fact, when we say someone or something is Pharisaical, we mean they or it is fastidious and pedantic; pedantic might be a better word to use – overly concerned with the details. Let's also remember, before we think about what Jesus has to say in Matthew 23, that the Pharisees wanted to encourage law keeping in the home and in daily life because that central pillar of Jewish religious life, the Temple, was not properly fulfilling its spiritual function and had become too enmeshed with economic and political concerns. The Pharisees sought to remedy this situation with pursuit of the law. The problem was that unless you were a Scribe, a Rabbi or a Pharisee, it was virtually impossible to keep all the purity laws. 'The poor' were too busy scratching a living. They couldn't obey all the laws; work made it impossible. Moreover, they probably didn't even know all the laws. A two-tier religious system developed. Judgement crept in. The Pharisees regarded some people as 'in' and others as 'out' of God's love. This is why they just cannot understand Jesus mixing with tax collectors and 'sinners'. Jesus came to show people what God was like; he came to show love and kindness. He came to set people free from slavish obedience to the law. He came to tell people and

show them that God has not written them off but cared deeply for the lost and those who felt excluded.

The Pharisees wielded the law in such a way as to cast heavy burdens on people. The poor were suffering because of the 'righteousness' of the Pharisees. This is why Jesus reserves his harshest criticism for them; they should know better. Moreover, the Pharisees' priorities were wrong. They neglected to consider justice, mercy and faith and concerned themselves with tithing mint, dill and cumin. Cleaning the outside of vessels before eating was all very well but what good is that if hatred, bitterness and judgement lurk inside the heart and mind? The deeper inference is that if the Pharisees and the Scribes knew God, they would have a better sense of what was important and what was not. They are, it seems, spiritually blind.

In these 'Woes' as they are commonly known, Jesus presented hypocrisy in conjunction with ostentation. The Scribes and Pharisees like to be seen, they want honour, acclaim, the best seats, to be revered, to be looked up to. They do not demonstrate humility but rather false piety. But don't we also live in a culture that does good and likes to tell others; a culture that enjoys showing-off, reaping praise and being admired. Social media only adds to this cult of self-promotion? We might want to pick up on social media in the discussions later on.

Moving on from the Woes, we read about the miracle healing of the crippled woman in Luke's Gospel. There are lots of points we could make about this miracle, but in the context of hypocrisy we see the law being used as an instrument of oppression rather than a means of liberation. As Jesus is well aware, people break the law when it comes to serving their own interests and when their property or possessions are at stake. The law is applied selectively in accordance with personal interests. It was hypocritical therefore to criticise Jesus for healing on the Sabbath, the very day when the God of Israel's liberation was worshipped in the synagogue where the woman was set free.

In his actions and words Jesus pointed out the hypocrisy of people who didn't care about the healing of others, or in the true liberation that the law pointed towards. Instead, the law was used as a way of shoring up position and authority, and thus its original intention was subverted.

As Church we can easily fall into a number of traps; getting priorities wrong, developing a religious system that is hard for people to access, failing to

understand the spirit of Canon Law while slavishly following the letter, practicing false piety and developing a theology that judges others. The knowledge that God loves all of us – whatever our ethnicity, gender identity, upbringing, social status, worldview - can prevent the slide into hypocrisy and judgmentalism. In Romans, Paul says that ‘all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.’ When we truly internalise this it can open us up to see and accept people without categorising or judging. No -one has the right to judge another except God. Our role is to extend a welcome to those who we encounter - a welcome that recognises that there is no ‘you’ and ‘us’, but that all are loved and uniquely valued in God’s sight.

Let’s Pray:

Almighty God,
We thank you for the gift of your holy word.
May it be a lantern to our feet,
a light to our paths,
and a strength to our lives.
Take and use us
to love and to serve
in the power of the Holy Spirit
and in the name of your Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.