

Lent Reflection - March 2nd

Matthew 23:1-12 (Psalm 50:8,16-end & Isaiah 1:10,16-20) Andrea Ward

For today's Lent Reflection today we're looking at **Matthew 23:1-12:**

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: ² 'The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. ³ So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practise what they preach. ⁴ 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.

⁵ 'Everything they do is done for people to see: they make their phylacteries^a wide and the tassels on their garments long; ⁶ they love the place of honour at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; ⁷ they love to be greeted with respect in the market-places and to be called "Rabbi" by others.

⁸ 'But you are not to be called "Rabbi", for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. ⁹ And do not call anyone on earth "father", for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. ¹⁰ Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. ¹¹ The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹² For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Reflection

"Practise what you preach!" Whether we're a church-goer or not, everyone will be familiar with that phrase - i.e. live out what you say you believe. This is another hard-punching bit of teaching from Jesus. I daresay there were a few uncomfortable people listening to him that day. Perhaps more than ever before, we live in a society in which those in authority or leadership are scrutinised for any deviance in their behaviour from what they are promoting or telling us to do. People are (rightly) looking for authenticity in their leaders.

The NIV bible translation gives today's passage the heading, "A warning against hypocrisy". Jesus's teaching here isn't just about hypocrisy, but it's certainly one of the key themes. Hypocrisy can be defined as "the failure to follow one's own rules, engaging in the same behaviour or activity for which one criticises another."

Amongst other things, this was what Jesus observed in the Pharisees, the religious leaders of his day: the complete failure to practise what they preached, to do the very thing that they told the people they must do to please God. Jesus loathed hypocrisy. Very sadly, hypocrisy in the church down the centuries has continued to cause people to turn away from the Christian faith, rejecting Jesus himself.

The failings of the Pharisees are so obvious, aren't they! Putting heavy burdens on people and not helping them to fulfil them; wearing extra large phylacteries (boxes containing the Scriptures) on their foreheads to show how important God's ways are to them, and priding themselves on being called "Rabbi" (literally "My great one").

And when you listen to God's anger with his people in another of our readings from Psalm 50:16-20, again, the gap between their religious observance and their behaviour is so clear!

'What right have you to recite my laws
or take my covenant on your lips?

¹⁷ You hate my instruction
and cast my words behind you.

- ¹⁸ When you see a thief, you join with him;
you throw in your lot with adulterers.
¹⁹ You use your mouth for evil
and harness your tongue to deceit.
²⁰ You sit and testify against your brother
and slander your own mother's son."

It's so obvious to us, isn't it? But that's the thing about hypocrisy - we see it very clearly in others but it's not so easy to see in ourselves. It's a bit like the speck we can see in another's eye when we fail to see the plank in our own eye! We may not stand up and preach on a Sunday (and those of us who do, need to be particularly careful about practising what we preach), we may not go round telling other people how they ought to live or look down on others, but hypocrisy can be just as alive and kicking in our lives as it is in the Pharisees - it can be so subtle that it's easy not to see it or notice it.

So, how can we help guard against hypocrisy in our lives? Well, in the few moments we have now, here are just three short thoughts:

- 1) Be honest with ourselves! Anyone who thinks they don't have a problem with hypocrisy in their lives is kidding themselves and precisely the candidate that hypocrisy is looking for. Being honest is a starting point.
- 2) Make confession a regular part of our prayer life - confession isn't given to us to make us feel guilty but to find freedom from guilt. Asking God to reveal to us those particular areas where we seem to regularly fall short of loving Him and loving our neighbour will help us become more aware of the gap between what we say we believe and what we actually do in practice. And then receiving his forgiveness and praying for the Holy Spirit to help us act differently.
- 3) Matthew 23:11 - Jesus says, "The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted." One of the tell-tale signs of hypocrisy is thinking of ourselves as better or above others, which also leads us to judge other people and their short-comings. Jesus challenged his listeners to be humble, and to be servants to one another. In humility, we remember that pride in any righteousness of our own is of no worth at all; the only thing of worth is humble reliance on our Servant King, Jesus Christ, who alone has made us holy and good in God's eyes.

Let's pause to reflect for a moment.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank you for your love and grace towards us.
We acknowledge the gaps there often are within us
between what we say we believe and how we live.
We ask for your forgiveness and for your Holy Spirit
to help us live more truthfully
and following your example of humility and service.
In Jesus name,
Amen.