
What a Bunch of Hypocrites

Matthew 23.1-15

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on October 30 2005 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

Imagine your country had been invaded. A foreign empire was running every aspect of government – making laws, raising taxes, arresting, sentencing and punishing people, sending in the troops when things looked lively. This was the situation the Jewish people faced in the time of Christ. And there were broadly two options available to them, which we could call the pragmatic and the ideological.

If you wanted to gain or maintain a position of any degree of wealth and power, you needed to collaborate with the Roman authorities. Rome didn't have enough troops to run its empire directly, so it administered its provinces through the cooperation of local elites. We meet these people several times in the gospels. Herod and his sons were half-Jewish kings who had authority in Israel so long as they remained loyal to Rome. The high priests of the Temple in Jerusalem were similarly in Rome's pocket – people like Caiaphas were Jews from the diaspora appointed by the Roman governor to keep the heart of the Jewish people beating as one with Rome. This is what the Sadducee party stood for: pragmatism. Collaboration involved a sober recognition that the sovereignty of Israel was dead and buried. The restoration of the successors of King David was a fantasy. But collaboration also required a perhaps misplaced confidence that concessions won from Rome were valuable and sustainable. A series of brutal interventions from the Roman governors suggested otherwise: the reality was that the Jerusalem authorities were puppets in the governor's hands.

The second more ideological approach was to ask the question, 'How did we get into this mess?' This is a question that had been asked before. The books of the Kings told the story of how Israel had departed from God's ways, how the northern kingdom had split away and been destroyed, and how the southern kingdom had gone into exile. Faithful Jews attributed their tribulations under Roman rule to a similar pattern of unfaithfulness. So what was to be done? There were three main answers to this question.

The first was to purify the land of Israel by overthrowing Roman rule. This was the Zealot option. It would be anachronistic to call the Zealots revolutionaries, because modern revolutionaries invariably assume the old way of doing things is bad and a new way is not only possible but urgently necessary. In other words their golden era lies in the future. Such a view was almost inconceivable in Jesus' time. Everyone assumed that the golden era lay in the past, and that all that could be desired was a restoration of this previous blessed order. For Jews that blessed era was generally perceived to the time of King David, about a thousand years before Christ.

The Zealots were rather like the insurgents in Iraq today. Like the Judaea of the gospels, Iraqi society is a traditional agrarian one: peasants are used to being exploited by landowners and governments. The economic crisis and social disruption of the war produces widespread banditry. The peasant is torn between a concern for law and order and a sense that the bandit shares, and often symbolizes, a basic agrarian sense of justice and religious loyalty. It is not always clear whether lawlessness is straightforward criminality or a more fundamental rejection of the status quo. But the Zealots, like the Iraqi insurgents, offered little more than one thing: a change of government. From Jesus' point of view, the Zealots changed not too much but too little.

The second ideological option was to accept the Sadducees' conclusion that there was little or no possibility of changing the existing order, but to seek to restore the people's intimacy with God by withdrawing into a rigorous community. These were the Essenes. They had an idea of purity that made it impossible to be holy if they were mixing with the general population. They kept the Sabbath to the point of resisting even calls of nature. (Looking around, I can't see many likely Essenes here today, although in deference to the Essenes we at the chapel don't provide any restrooms.) Nonetheless the Essenes were hospitable to strangers and kind to the sick.

The third option had a rather more democratic approach to the issue of purity. Jews had a holy land, the land of Israel, and within that land were holy places, arranged in a hierarchy, at the top of which was the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple. They also had holy times, notably the weekly Sabbath, but also festival days

such as the Passover, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles. They had holy persons, again in a hierarchy according to purity, with priests at the top and the physically impaired near the bottom. They had holy bodily marks, notably circumcision. And they had holy things, relating to food, but also to impure things such as dead bodies and bodily fluids.

It was practically and economically impossible for the common people, especially those who worked on the land, to keep these purity codes. The Sadducees assumed this meant that only the priests could genuinely be holy. This justified the maintenance of an upper class that found common cause with Rome. By contrast the Pharisees sought to enable the masses to observe the purity codes by reinterpreting the codes in applicable ways. One only begins to understand the Pharisees when one realizes that they were trying to restore Israel's relationship with God by bringing the whole people of Israel, the common people, within the orbit of purity and therefore holiness. They were providing an alternative to social withdrawal and violent restorationism that sought to bring Israel back to God.

So why does Jesus seem to be taking such a harsh view of what seems to be such a commendable movement? Well Jesus doesn't directly criticize the ethos of the Pharisees, just their execution of that ethos. The Pharisees' program was open to suspicion as a way of concentrating power in their own hands – as the only trustworthy arbiters of purity – and as a means of rallying a wide base of popular support for their social power without grounding that power in genuine identification with the poor. Jesus is constantly seen in conflict with the Pharisees' interpretations of purity and in criticism of their claims to be on the side of the masses. In today's passage he says, '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', and, 'You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces' – in other words they are not on the side of the common people – and meanwhile he says, 'they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues' – in other words their real interest lies not in social holiness but shoring up their own social status.

Since this is Reformation Sunday, it might be worth reminding ourselves that when the Protestant Reformers took these words from Matthew's gospel and applied them directly to the sixteenth century Roman Catholic Church, they were setting a very dangerous precedent. They have induced Protestants of succeeding centuries to fall into a terrible complacency. It is so easy for us to say the Reformation put the Bible in the hands of the common people in their own language, that it made the Church for everyone not just for the clergy, and that it made salvation directly accessible to all without the burdensome obstacles of sometimes bogus practices. But that would miss the point of this passage. For the sins it criticizes, developing a cult of personality among senior leaders, permitting a lifestyle amongst a minority of believers that ignores the sufferings of many of the faithful, and insisting on particular signs of holiness for the powerless many that are by no means always practiced by the powerful few – these sins are at least as much alive amongst Protestants, indeed I would suggest far more so, than amongst our contemporary Roman Catholic brothers and sisters. The way to read these words of Jesus is to assume he is talking about us. We are the Pharisees. This is a call for all churches to repent of sins that are very much alive today.

But when we repent, let us think carefully about the sin of hypocrisy. There's one kind of hypocrisy where you intend to do the right thing and indeed perhaps think you are doing the righteous thing but actually end up doing the wrong thing, and thus say one thing and do another. I want to stand up for this kind of hypocrisy. I call it the least bad sin. Why? Because at least you're trying. You're knee-deep in self-deception, of course, as all of us are. But by describing what you believe to be right living you are making yourself accountable to people, and sometimes you will end up doing the right thing if only because you don't want to be humiliated in front of them. The reason why I stand up for this kind of hypocrisy is that the alternative isn't usually pure, unsullied righteousness. Instead it's another kind of hypocrisy, which is knowing you're doing the wrong thing while still mouthing the language of righteousness. That's not really hypocrisy at all – it's cynicism. The reason why I say hypocrisy is the least bad sin is that it's way better than cynicism. The hypocrite is at least trying. The cynic isn't even trying.

It is fashionable in our generation to castigate hypocrisy. The popular newspapers like nothing more than to find a leader who has said one thing and turns out not to have lived up to his or her principles. But the result of setting the wolves on the hypocrites is that no one ever wants to commit publicly to any kind of principles at

all, for fear of being discovered to be a sinner, in other words, a human being. Hypocrisy is a risk we take every time try to commit ourselves to good ways to live.

So as we read Jesus' attack on the Pharisees, remember these three things. First, Jesus was not attacking the Pharisees' program, for of all the parties in Palestine at the time, the Pharisees' program was closest to Jesus' own. Instead, Jesus was criticizing the way the Pharisees carried out their program. Second, when we read these words about the Pharisees, don't allow them to confirm us in our self-righteousness about why our brand of Christianity is better than everyone else's. These words attack issues very close to the heart of our own Christian practice. And third, don't let Jesus' words about the cynicism of some of the Pharisees make us so scared of being called a hypocrite that we don't even try to be good. Half of being good is about striving to live up to standards and principles and patterns of life and if we never disclose to others what these are we are prisoners of our own self-deception. The other half of being good is having the grace to recognize we have been wrong, we're trying. What about you wrong, have hurt ourselves, others and God, and that we need forgiveness and a new start. If all you're worried about is being called a hypocrite you never discover these things.

Well may people call us, God's church, a bunch of hypocrites. But I hope that means that we can reply, 'At least we're trying. What about you?'