

**SERMON FOR THE DIOCESE OF BUNBURY: 5/11/2023: OS 31a:
GEOFF CHADWICK: MTT 23:1-12
“NIT-PICKY-NESS”
Matthew 23.1–12**

¹ 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 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.

Earlier in the year I preached a sermon at the Ordination in St Boniface Cathedral. In that sermon, I urged the ordinands to beware of the temptations of Lust, Loot and Legalism.

Legalism

Let’s talk about legalism.

Legalism is where Jesus took up arms against the Pharisees. We see this in today’s reading:

“The teachers of the law and the pharisees sit at Moses feet” (Mtt 23.1, NRSV)

This is a clear reference to keeping the law-as it was Moses who gave the Law at Mt Sinai.

However, Jesus goes on to say:

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. (Mtt 23:3-4, NRSV)

This is legalism, and I’m afraid it is one of the greatest dangers before the ordained. In my opinion, those ordained, can often, if they are not careful, fall into the trap of becoming a Pharisee. It manifests itself in the form of “nit-pickiness” and “mountainous mole-hill making”.

Let me give you a few examples.

- 1) I know of an assistant curate, who after being told by the Priest in Charge to set up the candle-sticks on the altar, watched in horror as the Priest then went and moved each of them 1cm to the left and right just to make a point. This sort of thing happened often. This act, was of course, not about candles, but about power and an attempt to humiliate the curate.
- 2) When I was a hospital chaplain, I heard a priest of another denomination telling the receptionist that there was no need for him to visit a distressed family because he didn't baptise dead babies! Theologically correct by pastorally disastrous!
- 3) I also know of a Pharisaic traffic camera. Obviously someone had ordained it! For your interest it's at the intersection of Bussell Highway and Norton Promenade Dalyellup. I was photographed (well not me personally but the car I was driving) doing 74km per through the intersection when the 80km/h sign was clearly visible just on the other side of the lights. Apparently, no transition space is allowed between the 70km/h on the entry to the lights and 80km/h on the exit. The camera was technically correct, but in my opinion very legalistic and nit-picky! Worse still it's not possible to argue with a camera! And I'm over it!
- 4) Does it really matter that the flowers on the altar don't match the liturgical colours of the day? After all Mrs Jabberwocky donated them to the church after her husband's funeral during the week.

Yes, beware of Pharisaism. I've mentioned the ordained, but of course, in reality, we all suffer from it. I wonder if you've ever argued a point, not because the issue was a stake, but because you wanted to look clever or knowledgeable? I learnt that lesson well when teaching adolescents for many years- don't get into an argument with them as you will always lose. That may even be true with 4-year-olds!

I want to be careful though. The extreme opposite of legalistic nitpickiness is sloppiness. I also want to say that we do need law – especially when it gives us permission to act in just and fair ways. Even the prayerbook has helpful “laws” written in the red print. These *rubrics* (*ruby coloured print*) as they are called, guide our worship in helpful ways. They help us to find that balance between perfectionism and laziness. Yes, we do want the church to be clean.

Yes, we do want the vessels polished.

Yes, we do want good music.

Yes, we do want liturgy done well and in the correct order.

But no, we don’t want what the old *1662 Prayerbook* calls “*too much stiffness in refusing and too much easiness in permitting any variation...*” (*1662 Book of Common Prayer*, The Preface).

“Stiffness” or “easiness”!

Guess what, we are Anglicans! Let’s aim for the middle way, or what the *1662 Prayerbook* calls keeping “... *the mean between two extremes*” (*1662 Book of Common Prayer*, The Preface)

Exhibitionism

Jesus also speaks against “doing everything for people to see.” (Mtt 23:5, NRSV) We might call this exhibitionism. Just imagine some pharisees thinking: “My phylactery is bigger than your phylactery! “Phylactery” refers to the little box of scrolls strapped to forehead and the armllets worn by the pharisees. (Today they are worn by orthodox Jews during worship). In this case, what is meant to be an aid to faithfulness has become a source of puffed up pride.

I once heard of an Ordinand's, conference where a bishop, unknown to the candidates, dressed as a kitchen hand and collected and cleaned the dirty dishes. One wonders what conversations he might have heard!

Curiously, Francis Xavier who took Christianity to Japan and South East Asia in the 16th century made an interesting discovery about dress-code and evangelism. In Japan he did not have success until he and his monks dressed as noble men. Then they were listened to.

In other places this method did not work. They had to dress as peasants to be heard!

So I wonder if this parish is a *dressing up* or a *dressing down* type place? Either way, it's not about how you dress, it's about being humble in the clothes that you wear. We can't improve on Jesus' words on this matter:

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.
(Mtt 23.11, NRSV)

We do well to remember that Jesus spoke these words in a highly stratified society. Royalty, the military, Roman Citizens (or not), business owners, men, women, children and slaves; all knew where they were in the "pecking order". Many longed to "rise above their status". But Jesus, ever the radical, teaches otherwise. "Descend below your status" is what he is saying. A challenge to the social norms of the time if ever there was one. (We will see this later when he rides a Donkey into Jerusalem, but that is getting ahead of ourselves!)

We must remember though, that the "descent" Jesus is talking about is humility mixed with dignity. It's not about being a "door mat". It's about willingness to serve; not about

willingness to be exploited. Dare I say that voluntary organizations, including the church, run the risk of burning out willing members by exploiting them. Instead, we must honour their willingness to serve.

So how about we do a little bit of self-examination? Let's be honest with ourselves.

- 1) Can I be Pharisaic?
- 2) Do I use my perfectionism and laziness as a "power game over others?"
- 3) Is my life out of balance-do I need to find a middle way?
- 4) Is my ego stroked selfishly when others praise me?
- 5) Am I allowing my willingness to serve to be turned into exploration?
- 6) Have I exalted a humble person recently?

Just a few questions to think about this week.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you