

Hymns: 3 “Eternal God, your love’s tremendous glory”
 365 “Jesu, the joy of loving hearts”
 248 “I heard the voice of Jesus say”
 82 “O Lord my God when I in awesome wonder”

Readings: Jeremiah 1:4-10
 Luke 13:1-17

“HYPOCRISY UNMASKED”

Earlier this morning, on radio Four’s Sunday Programme, I heard a discussion about a proposal to establish an Eruv in Manchester. I remember a similar debate taking place when we lived in Golders Green immediately before coming to Wesley’s Chapel.

The idea is that miles of wire stretched from lampposts and other polar phenomena will constitute a complete circle around several square miles of the city. This would allow Rabbis (in the community of observant Jews) to consider the enclosed area as an extension to their “houses and gardens”.

The fear being expressed by some Jews and others is that such a device could lead to the breaking up of a currently diverse and self-confident district as it becomes a sought-after Jewish enclave.

The question is: why does it need a wire cable to achieve this clearly desirable outcome? Why can’t the Rabbis rule that ordinary household tasks like pushing a pram or using one’s key can actually take place without such a device?

Why does the provision of ancient law need such an artifice to extend its range of usefulness rather than a simple recognition that, in modern times, the intention of those who framed the law might now be reinterpreted?

It’s all a mystery.

For so many (and not just observant Jews), it’s the letter rather than the spirit of the law that seems to matter most. For others, it’s the “tradition” (what’s been handed down over the generations) that has to be preserved in every one of its details. Nobody seems capable of considering it to be a body of customs and rituals that need to evolve to meet contemporary need.

And nothing got up Jesus’ nose more than these attitudes. Whenever he saw crass stupidity or double standards, a lack of compassion, rote quotation of the law, and a basic inhumane attitude towards others, it got his goat.

Take this morning's story as an example. This poor woman, crippled for eighteen (18) years, unable to stand up straight, side-lined from society, useless, hopeless, lingering pathetically on the fringe, - is noticed by Jesus. Not only noticed but honoured and respected by Jesus. He turns his attention towards her and, at a stroke, brings her centre stage. His healing hands not only deal with the crippling nature of her disability and her disfigurement, they restore her humanity and give her back to humanity.

What a story! What joy and rapture! What an awe inspiring moment! What cause for shouting hallelujah from the rooftops, whoopee, with every other breath, turning a cartwheel or two on the open street and out of sheer pleasure!

But wait a moment. Who are these tight-lipped, tight-hipped, grisly creatures standing in the crowd with obvious disapproval on their faces?

Why, it's our old finger-wagging friends of the "tut-tut brigade". It's the "law-and-order" outfit. It's the "you-can't-do-that-here-or-now" committee.

Such people, again, and again, succeed in touching a raw nerve with Jesus. He rounded on them. The shortest verse of the Bible is "Jesus wept". Well he not only wept, he got mad. No "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" here. He's in a stomp. He offers a tirade.

Jesus was absolutely committed to keeping the law. "I have not come to abolish the law" he said at one moment in his ministry before adding, "but to fulfil it". That is, he was absolutely committed to interpreting the law in a humane manner. And the pastoral will always challenge the nearly legal.

That's Jesus for you. How I wish people would heed what was so clearly his hallmark. Let me offer an example of the way this simple attitude is ignored while other much more tenuous suggestions are made with considerably less evidence.

Demanding one's constitutional rights when time and context that produced one's constitution have so clearly changed, when one's rights (as they were framed centuries ago) must be measured against the potential harm that could easily ensue from the naked application of those rights – all that amounts to an argument of dinosaurs, creatures formed in an age that no longer exists.

It's like the blasphemy laws of this country. It's like the gun laws of our transatlantic neighbours. There, in each case, anchored in a literal understanding of documents that were formed in radically different times to meet totally different needs.

There are a dozen examples of Jesus using the word "hypocrites". Looked at together, they clearly point in one direction. Four of these examples come in the Sermon on the Mount.

- Giving alms? Philanthropy? Supporting a good cause? Ah! But do you want to see how your money is being spent? Do you want your name published on a list of contributors? Do you want a personal note of thanks from the chairman of the charity? If so be careful. The word hypocrite may be coming your way.

- Deeply devout? A man (or woman) of prayer? Is piety your natural style? Are you drawn towards espousing spiritual causes? That's all fine. But are you secretly wanting people to spot that you're a man or woman of religion? That you're not like other time servers who are only superficial in their devotions? If so, be careful. The word hypocrite may be coming your way.
- So then you believe in fasting. It's all to do with self-discipline. You make your Lenten sacrifices. You take religious duty with utter seriousness. Good. But do you wear a down cast mask when you do all these things? Can people read from your face (which appears sometimes to be etched with vinegar) that you are actually giving up all these normal comforts? Do you work away at inviting the attention (even the admiration) of others as you undertake these gestures? If so, be careful. The word hypocrisy may one day be hung around your neck.
- How quick are you to judge others? Are you a little self-righteous? Do you find yourself pointing at people and saying to those around you "look at him or "look at her". That's a homosexual. He's been in jail. That man's out of work and doesn't make much effort to find employment. Look at those Muslims. Woah! You get the drift. You're not perfect yourself. How can you be? So be careful how you judge others. Indulging in such dismissive and contemptuous action will come home to haunt you. And the word hypocrite may well end up as an adjective that people use about you.

These are the places where the word appears in the Sermon on the Mount. But there are other places too.

Ashing hands becomes more important than performing deeds of mercy; Keeping strictures relating to the Sabbath are more important than bringing a dead soul back to life; playing word games with Jesus (on the question of paying taxes to Caesar) becomes more important than really engaging with his words and challenges; cheating and lying in the workplace are pointed out – all of these invoking the word "hypocrite".

No one portrayed the downside of religion better than Jesus.

"People who honour God with their lips but their hearts are far from him" – these are hypocrites. Those who "worship God in vain, who turn precepts into doctrines" – these are hypocrites too.

And what about this (see Matthew 23:13-15)? Here's a word addressed to the tut-tut brigade which must be taken seriously by every one of us. We must be on our guard lest we "lock people out of the kingdom of heaven." Lest our way of life keeps us out of the kingdom and leads to our being prepared to stop at nothing to keep others out too.

We'd give our all to bring people to our point of view, our way of seeing and doing things. And in doing so we'd be ready to make a person "twice as much a child of hell" as we are ourselves. – here's hypocrisy on the march once again.

Hypocrites are like whited sepulchres – torted up to look nice and clean but, when all is said and done, homes for the dead. Hypocrites are people who wash the outside

of the cup, the side that's seen by others, while everything within the cup remains putrid. Hypocrites are people who play parts, who act out roles, and keep their real selves secret and different.

It was Jesus who said all these things. I'm fed up with, for example, those who condemn homosexuality as unchristian. They drag one or two biblical verses, quite scattered here and there throughout the bible in justification of their point of view. But there isn't a single word from Jesus in any evidence that they can bring forward. In his condemnation, - rounded, repeated, insistent, - he can be quoted in extense so. The man who received a woman who suffered for eighteen years, who healed her on the Sabbath, would not conceivably refuse to keep company with someone who was gay. And if people tut-tutted him, quoted scripture against him, I'm convinced he'd have turned on them in anger.

John Wesley preached the famous sermon from this pulpit, a sermon on "Bigotry" you could quite easily substitute the word "hypocrisy" for "Bigotry". Let me end by giving a flavour of the way our Father in God, John Wesley, saw these things.

- If I believe that my party is right and all others wrong, I am a hypocrite.
- If I hold that my social group can be favoured against the interests of all others, I am a hypocrite.
- If I equate God's chosen people with membership of my church and dismiss all other churches, I am a hypocrite.
- If I assert that particular signs (the Toronto Blessing, the Apostolic Succession, Speaking in Tongues, Papal Infallibility, etc.) are indelible influences of true religion and those who do not have them are lost, outside the pail, worthless, I am a hypocrite.
- If I suggest that might nation right or wrong, is above reproach and refuse to find good in other people's, I am a hypocrite.
- If I believe that my political philosophy, whether that be Capitalism, Communism, Socialism, Neo-Liberalism, or any other ism, offers the sole and true understanding of how things are or ought to be, then I am a hypocrite.
- If I believe that God has disclosed himself uniquely to people of my own faith group, my own religion, my own race, and deny his presence and activity in others, then I am a hypocrite.

I think you get the point.

But John Wesley didn't end there. It wasn't enough for him that we consider the views of others with proper seriousness. He went further. We must encourage the other person, Catholic, Orthodox, Calvinist, Unitarian, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, whom God is pleased to employ. We must speak well of them wherever we are; we must defend their character and their mission; we should show them kindness in word and deed; we should enlarge their sphere of action.

That's pretty radical stuff as indeed is Wesley's warning at the end of his sermon. We must beware at all times, when we meet hypocrisy, that we should not become hypocrites ourselves in the way we respond to it.

Hypocrisy. Let's have none of that here. Amen