

RELIGION FOR DISPLAY

Matthew 23.1-12

Introduction

Sometimes we forget how reading the Bible and singing hymns in worship can be a very contentious and counter-cultural within our culture and society. When we sing even a simple hymn like “Praise God from whom all blessings flow” we are actually engaging in a strenuous argument with our culture that sings, “Praise the celebrities and the powerful and the rich, from whom flows everything that the rest of us is after.”

Today’s Gospel reading takes us into this territory and uses highly conflictual language to take us there.

And this seems like very funny Gospel to have for a baptism. But it isn’t Hugo. Baptism is a countercultural activity. Your parents and godparents have brought you here and perhaps unwittingly put you in a difficult and dangerous spot.

This Gospel reminds us that you are going to be baptized into an empire that has a different set of values to the one you will grow up in. And that is dangerous.

Context

Jesus is in the Temple. It is Tuesday of the last week of his life. He has just finished a life and death struggle with leaders, political and religious, of Israel. He has won the debates but lost. He will die in 3 days. That is now obvious to all. He maybe the Lord messiah but he will die.

So he turns from the leaders to the crowds and the disciples. The future lies with them. Thus for the next three chapters (23-25) he

brings together his final teaching, the fifth great block that began with the Sermon on the Mount and finishes in the last judgment.

Jesus' words have been used by European Christians of the west and the east to vilify Jews and to legitimate attacks on Jewish people and the robbery from them of their property and rights.

Jesus directed his criticism at Jewish leadership just like the prophets before him. It was far from uncommon. They are allies of Rome and administer imperials society. From that they gain status and power. Jesus never suggests that God has rejected the Jews or that all Jews have rejected God. These words cannot be legitimately used for anti-Semitic purposes.

I say this because it has become fashionable to be pro-Arab and anti-Jewish in the Christian church. The complexities and toxicity of Middle Eastern politics are no excuse for Christians to jump on board the virulent Arab anti-Jewish ideology.

This passage is about the constitution of disciples into a church and it addresses specifically Christian leadership.

And that is servant leadership-humility

“The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted” (11-12)

Our pattern is Jesus. This is the crucified Messiah who pursues the rule of God to the cross and does God's will on earth as in heaven even if it means humiliating powerlessness and suffering.

That is what servant ministry is at its core. It is serving the empire of God no matter what the cost. And the purpose of that empire is to bring all into loving fellowship with the Father.

So servant ministry does not mean that you are the master and I am your servant to do your bidding. It does not mean that I am the master and you are my servants to do my bidding.

It means that we serve together the one goal; the empire of God, the empire of just and loving fellowship with him. That is our shared servanthood. Our roles may differ in the ordering of our life together but our common task is as servants of the kingdom of the crucified.

Servant leadership by clergy or laity has prophetic, pastoral and redemptive facets. It is open to abuse. So what is required for the prosecution of that task is humility. And humility is mightily misunderstood.

The opposite of humility is pride. The Jewish and Christian tradition uniformly condemns pride and tells stories to illustrate it, like Gen. 3 the fall. It is often characterized by inordinate self-esteem, self-importance, boasting, rebellion, and being above the common herd or the law. But mostly the stories of the OT and NT tell stories of people who think God redundant, for whom God has no place in their lives, who can save themselves and who simply think that the world can be cast in their image.

The Greek and European tradition in contrast has always regarded pride as a virtue and humility as a vice. Aristotle and Nietzsche, the philosopher of the present times, hold this view. In Nietzsche's view the will to power, based on pride and status, is the true virtue.

For the Christian, Christ alone exalts the human being and thus we are saved from self-exaltation and also self-abasement. We can be proud and boast; in the Crucified and Servant God.

So now we have some clue about what humility is. It has nothing to do with humiliation or self-abasement, or passive-aggressive

behavior that says yes or no as required but seethes with resentment and works to spoil everything. The servant God does act like that.

Humility is joyful abandonment before God's grace acknowledging that all we have and all we are and all that we will be comes from God. Humility is the acknowledgment of our creature hood before our creator and living with love and joy in that. Humility is living in the exaltation that the suffering Messiah gives us, bringing us to himself. Humility is living in the joy and love of the Spirit.

In other words humility is about the loving relationship which God endows on us. And as Augustine noted, "Where there is humility, there is love."

Then, and only then, can human relationships have a chance. Then the church can flourish; then it can pursue its task together.

I have started this sermon at the end of the reading (11-12) because it gives us the core, the substance of Christian leadership that any Christian leader, man or woman, lay or clerical must exercise. We may have different gifts and different roles with different authority but we enjoy the same grace of the joy of the Spirit.

But there are huge problems in this pretty picture and they mostly concern our common human nature.

Servant leadership-the pitfalls of lack of integrity and love of status and power

Jesus highlights these by publicly critiquing his opponents. This is a dangerous act. He is already marked to die; now his fate is sealed.

I want you to notice that although Jesus begins with his opponents and their failed leadership of the people of God, half-way through he

turns to “you”; the disciples. This is all about disciples. The opponents are simply foils.

They are to live what they teach 2-4

This is about integrity and authenticity; the consistency of heart, mind, tongue and action. We want our leaders to have that but often they do not. We want to know that there is no hidden agenda, no hidden lie, no clever deceit. These surround us every day.

In other words it is the refusal to live the lie. No wonder we pray, “Lord have mercy.”

The teaching office was no place for hypocrisy. But worse it is no place for binding people with heavy burdens that bind the person and flatter the teacher. The teaching office is redemptive. Its purpose is to set people free. It is good news not burdensome duty.

Status symbols and power are irrelevant to them (5)

All the status symbols of the ancient world are set out and they have not changed much. Flash upmarket clothing or clothing especially designed to signify status, special places of honour in all social circumstances, special titles, specially designed roles.

Forget it all.

This is very radical. The spelling out of what Jesus says makes us realize how deep is the well called ‘love of status.’ Not even the most radical revolutionaries have been able to achieve what Jesus speaks of. Indeed, the revolution has become the deep well from which the love of status and power can draw. I draw your attention to China’s recent revolutionary congress and its decisions.

And the deep underlying theology. We find it in the prohibition to call someone “father.” Why? How do we begin our common prayer?

“Our father.” We have one Father and we come to him through the Son, Messiah Jesus. We have one teacher, the crucified Messiah. Other than that we are siblings, brothers and sisters.

The deep problem with power as it is often exercised is its use of coercion subtle or otherwise. Status helps with coercion. It helps cover opposition. The love of status, power and coercion belong in the one basket. Jesus throws the basket out.

Jesus is not creating a new law about titles, clothing or social symbols. He is on about heart and mind. Titles and social honours are an irrelevance distract from the kingdom’s transformation of the human condition.

Conclusion

I have often expressed the view that the church’s only reason for existence is to live out the empire of God and make it work as an alternative. That is a common goal and a personal one.

So Hugo this is what you are getting into. It’s a glorious inheritance but shockingly hard and against the grain. We will uphold you.