

SERMON 5 NOVEMBER 2017 (SECOND SET)

When I considered today's Gospel reading, (Matthew 23.1-7), I realised that it encapsulated a theme which really needed to be addressed. The question of the exercise of religious authority. Who gets to set the rules! Who sits on Moses' Seat? So I will concentrate my attention on the Gospel reading.

Before beginning I need to outline briefly and how the Jewish legal system (Talmud see below) evolved.

It began with the written Torah. The first five books of the bible. Next the oral Torah. Legal traditions of the Jewish people, believed to have been transmitted to Moses on Mount Sinai and from him through a chain of oral transmitters. Scholars or sages and prophets. Commentary on commentary on commentary.

It contains legal rules but being oral not written could be quite ambiguous.

In fact, creative interpretation by scholars over the centuries became necessary to moderate some of the harsher penalties existing in the Torah. For example, the written Torah prescribed death by stoning for a child who defied his parents. Legal authorities chose to read into the detailed wording of the biblical verse a requirement that the mother and father bringing the accusation must have identical voices and be identical in appearance.

My children will be pleased to hear about that!

The Sanhedrin was established in 191 B.C. as a combined high court and legislature and the King, (and after Roman rule, the community itself) could also make laws.

Commentaries on the law by scholars (often referred to as Sages) were compiled into the Mishnah in about 200 A.D. Unlike a modern law code, the Mishnah did not state what the law actually was. Instead, it offered arguments attributed to sages of the past for alternative interpretations of the law.

Confusion as you can imagine was common.

But the **Temple** was central to this process. No wonder Jesus was exercised here. The hypocrisy he was railing against was being practiced in God's House. Jesus' views of the sanctity of the Temple are well described in his attitude to the moneychangers ("..My house shall be called the house of prayer but you have made it a den of thieves" Matthew 21.13). Moses Seat was right within the Temple!

Now the church which the Gospel of Matthew was written for, was made up of multiracial Christians, mostly of Jewish origin as well as some of Gentile origin. Times were tense and the Church itself was divided. Hatred, false prophets and apostasy were rife (Matthew 13.21; 24.10; 13.22; 7.15 and 24.11).

Matthew's mandate to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28.19) had apparently provoked a hostile reaction in the wider community, perhaps in the same way that door to door salesmen do today!

While the then Church was **not** suffering the grinding results of a child sex abuse Royal Commission and an implacably hostile electronic and print media like today, there **was** persecution from members of the wider community: Judicial harassment, hatred, even execution (Matthew 10.18,22; 13.21; 24.9).

Persecution was also suffered at the hands of the Jewish community. Verbal abuse, arraignment for disturbing the peace, perjured testimony, flogging in the Synagogues, pursuit from city to city and even death. (Matthew 5.11; 10.16; 5.11; 10.17; 23.34; 10.23; 23.34; 10.28; 23.34-35).

Yet, like today, the Christians of Matthew's church were materially well off and were not under the thumb of Pharisaic Judaism (Matthew 15.13; 16.18). Perhaps, again, a little like today.

Into this somewhat fractured institution, Matthew's Gospel speaks well to the Jesus message. It urges organisational unity in the Commission of the Keys (Matthew 16.17-20). It also shows up the failings of the then Jewish Pharisaic leadership (eg Matthew 21.23; 22.34-40).

In today's Gospel reading (Matthew 23.1-12), Jesus attacks the scribes and Pharisees; not so much for their teaching as such but for their hypocrisy, religious show and self exultation. Perhaps in much the same way that we, today, react to our contemporary political, judicial and parliamentary officials. But while we may deplore our present office holders for their corruption, cronyism and general incompetence, we still respect the institutions that they represent and that we all live under.

In today's reading, the Pharisaic hypocrisy is truly breathtaking and is exposed as such. In fact, Matthew Chapter 23 represents a whole-scale rejection of Pharisaism itself.

But Jesus rails against the religious **authorities**. Not against the **idea** of religious authority.

He knows that the "religious authorities" are flawed men but that "religious authority" itself comes from God.

No scribe or Pharisee would have defended hypocrisy, welcomed the death of God's prophets or suggested that a lesser law should take precedence over a greater law. Or would they? Well in fact they did! And, as a result, their hypocrisy is truly monumental.

Matthew's Jesus argues as a Jew with the Jewish religious authorities. He says that the leaders have been unfaithful to their own traditions. But why have they been unfaithful? We can only guess. Expediency, the urge to exercise power, jealousy. All of the above?

One interesting case study here is that of Rabbi Gamaliel II who was "Nasi" ("prince" or president of the Sanhedrin) around 80-90AD. His introduction of a "test benediction" in Synagogues to exclude "Nazarenes" and other heretics is, we think, documented in the Gospel of John (Gospel of John 9.22; 16.2).

Rabbi Gamaliel II famously quarrelled with Rabbi Joshua Ben Hananiah over the calculation of the date of Yom Kippur. To punish Joshua he made him wear week day clothes to worship on Holy Day to humiliate him and later further punished him by making him teach while standing rather than seated. This actually precipitated a Rabbinic revolt.

When Joshua complained of this to Rabbi Dosa Ben Hyrcanus an interesting insight emerged.

Rabbi Dosa accepted that Rabbi Gamaliel II was quite wrong in his calculation of the date of Yom Kippur. But he noted that

"If we go and challenge Gamaliel's court we must also challenge each and every court which has presided since the days of Moses until now... each and every set of three (rabbis) that preside as a court over Israel are equivalent to the court of Moses" (Mishnah, Rosh Hashannah 2.9)

In the event, this matter was settled when Rabbi Dosa submitted by coming to Rabbi Gamaliel with his staff and his money in hand "on the day that the Day of Atonement fell in accordance with his

(Rabbi Gamaliel II's) reckoning" **for a uniform calendar of festivals, holidays and fast days is one of the most important things that comprise a united people.** (Parashat Korah 5761/ June 23, 2001. On Controversy. Hanna Kasher, Dept. of Philosophy, Bar-Ilan University's Parashat Hashavua Study Center).

A similar understanding is expressed elsewhere in the Talmud. For example

"..When there is controversy in a court, it is the ruination of the world" (Derekh 7.37)

Unity of the community was vital to survival.

Another example of the risks here was disagreement between 'Rabbi' Shammai and 'Rabbi' Hillel and their followers, or Schools. These two Schools were a very important feature of Judaic thought around the time of Jesus.

Hillel (trad 110BC - 10AD) usually spoke for peace and tolerance. Shammai was hardline.

"Let a man be always humble and patient like Hillel, and not passionate like Shammai" (Shab. 30b; Ab. R. N. xv.).

But "When insufficiently trained disciples of Shammai and Hillel became numerous, controversy became rife in Israel and the Torah became two Teachings" (Sanhedrin 88b). This division degenerated into a slaughter (Jerusalem Talmud (Shabbat 1.3). So even the controversy between religious teachers (tannaim see below) which may have begun as an argument on fine theological points, in time developed into violent civil strife. In instructing his followers to obey the law set down by those on Moses' Seat, Jesus is minimising the risk of violence and division.

During Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem, Shammai's School was in the ascendancy and was supported by the Zealots. But after 72 AD, when Matthew's Gospel was written, Hillel's School's star had risen again. Shammai's rulings lost authority during the tenure of Gamaliel II by which time the Jewish leadership had lost its taste for conflict.

Were the Pharisees who questioned and tried to trick Jesus in Matthew's Gospel mostly followers of the Shammai School? Ie hardliners rather than moderates. It is certainly possible as their tactics are hardly "humble and patient like Hillel". If so, it would explain in part how a whole-scale attack on Pharisaic Judaism by Jesus in Matthew's Gospel could have been well received by a largely Jewish origin audience in Matthew' church.

Of considerable interest to today's Gospel reading and the authority of the Law was the response by Shammai and Hillel to a Gentile who asked that the Torah be explained to him while he stood on one foot. In other words briefly!

Shammai's dismissed the man. Hillel accepted the question but gently chastised him:

"What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow: this is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn" (Shab 31a): The Golden Mean which, if added to the Shema, is similar to Jesus' comments in Matthew 22.35-40.

Unity of the community was a big problem within Jewish society.

Jesus saw that a people **united** by God's laws was both necessary and part of God's plan.

Hypocrisy was the price which had to be paid for **unity** because of the complicated precedent-based religious legal system which had grown out of centuries of interpretation and reinterpretation and misinterpretation. Mans hand lay heavy on God's law!

Perhaps something of the same is happening today. Our relationship with the present political and judicial leadership has been degraded by the failings of our own precedence-based administrative systems.

So how did Jesus deal with this dilemma? How could he enjoin Christians to obey commands steeped in hypocrisy?

Quite simply! By placing an over-arching principle in front of all the laws and to which all laws were to be subordinated. In modern techno terms, he pushed a reset button!

"And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22.35-40)

A simple, complete and universal statement which can guide our thoughts and actions whenever we are confronted by a precedent-based legal or scriptural system where pragmatism and political realism may encourage hypocrisy.

A law based on the idea that we should strive to achieve the best possible relationship with God as well as with our neighbours. Not a law **proscribing** what we do. But **prescribing** what we should do. Encouraging the good not prohibiting the bad.

No wonder Jesus advised his followers to keep the commands issued by the authorities. Jesus's great Commandment holds us to a much higher standard of action and thought than edicts from Moses's Seat.

Now was the lawyer who tested Jesus here a follower of the School of Shammai'? If so, Jesus's response reflecting Hillel's comment on the Torah would likely have infuriated him and could suggest that Jesus' attack on Pharasiasm was more an attack on hardline Pharasiasm rather than on Pharasiasm itself. Again, this would, perhaps have been more acceptable in Matthew's church.

So where does this leave us? Well last Wednesday, 31 October, was the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. It marks the day Martin Luther sent a copy of the 95 Theses to Archbishop Albert of Mainz. This Movement directly challenged the authority of the Pope, then incumbent, if you will, of Moses' Seat.

Matthew's reading today (Matthew 23.1-12) makes it quite plain that spiritual authority lies with Christ, not Man and that those who will speak for Christ's church must first be humbled, not exalted. The Pope may interpret scripture as did the scribes and Pharisees but, like them, he is not above them (Address to the Christian Nobility; Martin Luther).

So as we celebrate All Saints Day and remember those whose lives and works have brought us our faith throughout the centuries, let us remember those whose courage and struggle a half a Millenia ago brought us the Protestant faith we hold today.

Especially the Oxford Martyrs, Thomas Cranmer, Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley. But also those individuals, men and women, not remembered by history but whose contribution was essential to our understanding of the nature of the relationship we are all granted with God.

Men and women who paid with their lives for the beliefs we now all share. Often with great courage.

"Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man! We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out. (Foxe's Book of Martyrs) (1563)

What an example to us today.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your love for us and especially remember with grateful thanks the works and lives of those whose sacrifice has brought us your message of love through the centuries. Grant them your peace and a place by your throne.

Lux æterna luceat eis, Domine:

May light eternal shine upon them, O Lord,
with Thy Saints for evermore:
for Thou art gracious.

Eternal rest give to them, O Lord,
and let perpetual light shine upon them:
With Thy Saints for evermore,
for Thou art gracious.

Amen

Notes

Talmud

The Talmud has two components; the Mishnah (c.200 CE), a written compendium of Rabbinic Judaism's Oral Torah; and the Gemara (c. 500 CE), an elucidation of the Mishnah and related Tannaitic writings that often ventures onto other subjects. "Talmud" translates literally as "instruction" in Hebrew, and the term may refer to either the Gemara alone, or the Mishnah and Gemara together.

The entire Talmud consists of 63 tractates, and in standard print is over 6,200 pages long. It is written in Tannaitic Hebrew and Jewish Babylonian Aramaic and contains the teachings and opinions of thousands of rabbis (dating from before the Common Era through the fifth century CE) on a variety of subjects, including Halakha (law), Jewish ethics, philosophy, customs, history, lore and many other topics. The Talmud is the basis for all codes of Jewish law, and is widely quoted in rabbinic literature.

Tannaim

Rabbinic sages whose views are recorded in the Mishnah, from approximately 10-220 CE. The period of the Tannaim, also referred to as the Mishnaic period, lasted about 210 years.

Hillel explaining the Torah to a gentile standing on one foot

