

SERMON 5 NOVEMBER 2017

A long time ago now, my cousin Colin had not long finished his medical training in Edinburgh and was specializing in anaesthetics. He had gone back to live in the parental home, the large manse of St Cuthbert's Church of Scotland at the west end of Princes Street in Edinburgh. Colin was an outrageous tease, as I knew well. My Very Reverend uncle, a Doctor of Divinity, fortunately, had a sense of humour, though I am sure this was tested many times. When the manse phone rang, as of course it often would, and Colin was at home to answer it, the caller inevitably asked to speak to Dr Small. Colin would then fire back, "Which one? The one that practices or the one that preaches?".

I suspect that the world would be a very different place if everybody practised what they preached. The history of the Christianity and the Church might have been very different. There would have been no need for Luther and for the Reformation he called for. The pope at the time would not have died leaving the Vatican almost bankrupt because of his self-indulgent spending. They would not have had to contrive fund-raising means such as the selling of indulgencies that preyed upon the poor especially. One of the reasons the Reformation spread was that people knew within them that what the Church was doing did not match up to what the message of Jesus had been. Social history throughout Christendom from Constantine onwards could have shown a real care for the poor and the sick because the Churches should have been focussed on looking after them, but, in the way of human vanity, ambition and power plays got in the way. It has gone on like this through the centuries, with, thankfully, many redeeming examples of people and organisations seeking to live out their faith in humility and obedience. There have always been people who have understood that response to Christ is a call to integrity and simplicity of purpose, to practising what is preached. It is no different for us now. In this post-Christendom world with so many secular and other faith options, the difficulty for the Church is that there remains a widespread perception of moral corruption. Too many appalling instances of sexual and physical abuse have filled the headlines as the Royal Commission investigated these over many long

months. Maybe these are not the story of the whole, or even a big part of the Christian life of the Churches, but where there has been cover-up of the behaviour of individuals who have certainly not practised what is preached, the big picture can become contaminated too.

It seems that these temptations to abuse of power and privilege have always been there and that can make this whole scenario depressing. But this is where the gospel gives us a clear call, a reminder about our focus. Matthew is well known in his gospel for painting the Pharisees in a poor light and not without reason. They were the guardians of the Law and of religious practice. Obviously, as Jesus sat in the Temple a few hours before his arrest, he saw how these leaders of the people portrayed themselves, with their very evident signs of devotion displayed in their dress: the phylacteries, little boxes containing words of the Torah strapped to their foreheads and sleeves and the long prayer tassels on their cloaks. How different did Jesus look? Everything points to the fact that he had very few possessions and told his disciples to act likewise as they went about the place. He may well have had a fringed prayer shawl as we are told that the woman with the haemorrhage reached out to touch the fringe of his garment. But Jesus' prayer life was conducted in the hours of darkness when he could be alone with God. He did not want or need to be seen to be behaving piously for show. Let's notice that Jesus doesn't condemn the Pharisees for what they are teaching. It was they who helped preserve Jewish life, especially after the Temple was destroyed. He tells his followers to listen to them but not to act like them. What he would not tolerate was their hypocrisy. They should be what they appeared to be. His disciples need to be able to discern what is right and true, what holds integrity. As do we. To do that, the disciples, and we ourselves, should look to Jesus, to listen, to learn, and to allow ourselves to be challenged by the love that is the heart of Jesus preaching and practice.

That love does not preclude his judgement. What Jesus most strongly criticises is the fact that these religious leaders have added to the burdens of religious practice that the ordinary, and often poor people carry. They have not tried to lighten their load. When we look at Jesus, what do we see? We see the one who was moved

with compassion to give of himself, hour after hour, even to the point of exhaustion, as he reached out to help them. He not only taught them but he touched them and healed them.

Hovering over all this is the call to humility. The more I think about this, the more humility seems to be fundamental to our Christian calling. As Matthew records it, Jesus himself tells his hearers that no-one is to be given a title, be it Rabbi, Teacher, Father, or Instructor, as the NIV translates "leader". Our institutions set up leadership and hierarchy, and that is necessary. What is not, is that people bear these titles like phylacteries on their metaphorical foreheads or arms. As Christians, we look to Christ before any other. Our struggle comes because we like the feeling of power and control, as we have seen. And it is easy to be taken in by show. There is a lot of *razmataz* around today, not just in our world of celebrity, with the so-called heroes and legends we admire. We can get sucked in, in our Churches too. Now we are moving closer to Christmas which challenges us with the stark humility of incarnation, in contrast to the extravagant secular silly season. There is so much that calls for us to look intently, to reclaim what is real, what is about truth and not façade, what is about love and not just about superficiality.

It could all seem quite hopeless really, given everything we see going on around us. But that is why we are here. This is about an alternative way of being. It is wonderful to be able to come together on a Sunday morning like this and to hear again the gospel message and be reaffirmed that, however faltering our ways may be, we are joining ourselves to a tradition that looks to integrity, to humility and love. It is so good to see a pope who lives in his little apartment, travels by bus and who drove his own small Fiat to the steps at the White House, flanked by enormous black cars of the White House security detail. A pope who knelt down and washed the feet of prisoners and refugees. He models integrity, humility and love. These three are inseparable really.

As Richard Rohr, whose words I quoted on the cover sheet said, humility and honesty are really the same thing. Humility runs the risk of being misinterpreted,

because it can become a false self-abasement. That can become humiliation. Too many people have been trapped in abusive situations because they feel that somehow, they deserve this humiliation. That is a basic dishonesty. When people came to Jesus, they knew that he could “see” them. Maybe that seems a little threatening. We are more used to trying to hide or disguise our flaws. But there is such relief in not having to pretend – relief because we are freed from dishonesty, from hypocrisy. When people came to Jesus, they knew that they were loved, whoever they were, whatever their failings. They knew that that love called out the best in them. They were healed and at peace because they were restored to the reality of who it was that they were made to be. So it is with us, as we are gathered around the table and are offered the simple feast of God’s love for us in Christ. Here is the table where, humbly, we can be ourselves, because we are called to come, to take and eat and be part of the immense grace that encompasses every part of us. Then we can practice what we preach and speak and act out of God’s love, through God alone.