

SERMON: 1 November 2020 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Word in Action Matthew 23:1-12

We all know how important it is to practise what you preach.
Not just for preachers.
Your actions should match up to your words.
You shouldn't be, as my granny used to say, all talk and no action.

Jesus gets to the heart of the problem with religion. It's useless unless it means something.

Indeed it's worse than useless if preachers don't walk the talk.
It can do great harm.

As Jesus puts it, it's like taking a heavy load and tying on a person's back and refusing to help carry it.

It's really a form of abuse.
Think of it. Jesus is saying that preaching can be a form of abuse.
Watch out all who set themselves up to preach!

William Barclay said that religious people can often make religion an "intolerable burden".

Here's what he said,

"Here is the test of any presentation of religion. Does it make it wings to lift a man up, or a deadweight to drag him down? Does it make it a joy or a depression? Is a man helped by his religion or haunted by it? Does it carry him, or has he to carry it? Whenever religion becomes a depressing affair burdens and prohibitions, it ceases to be true religion". (285)

How do you feel about your own faith? Does it liberate you or is it a burden? Does it energise you or does it sap you of energy? Does it enable a life changing encounter with the Divine or is it something else.

Now don't beat yourself up about it if religion for you is a negative experience. It may not be your fault.

It may be the fault of those who lead.

Jesus pointed the finger at the teachers who were supposed to interpret the laws of Moses, Torah, in a way that would add to life and help bring life not weigh it down or suffocate it.

Good leadership is therefore critical.

Who's the better leader - Donald Trump or Nicola Sturgeon?

Why?

What makes one leader better than another?

The religious leaders in Jesus' day were more interested in doing things for show and recognition than they were in improving life for others.

They took the best seats and expected special treatment because of their status.

Jesus turns the tables on this way of thinking and says the greatest among you must be your servant.

Service is the quality that's most needed in a leader.

Who's the better servant - Donald Trump or Nicola Sturgeon?

But politics aside this is about authenticity in religion.

Here's Willie Barclay again,

"The whole design of the Pharisees was to dress and act in such a way as to draw attention to themselves; the whole design of the Christian should be to obliterate himself, so that if men see his good deeds, they may glorify not him, but his Father in Heaven. Any religion which produces ostentation in action and pride in the heart is a false religion". (287)

As Jesus said, we have only one Father in Heaven and only one Messiah to lead us, and he has shown us the path of servanthood.

Let's resolve today to serve one another in love and humility.

Let's not think of ourselves as more important than anyone else.

Let's do all we can to preach *good* news, which is life giving and sets people free.

There are lots of people who could do with good news at the moment, me included. We all need it. Things are hard for many people and to some extent for all of us.

We know we'll get through this pandemic despite all the uncertainty that this winter might bring.

Let's make the most of these weeks ahead to become people who don't add to other people's burdens but are quick to help to carry them, in whatever small way.

Let's show people that God's love is real and is intended for everyone, no matter who they are or what they've done in the past.

On all saints day, it's appropriate to remember people who sought to live good lives in the past. For me, Thomas Keating was a saint. He only died a couple of years ago. He wrote a few books and was well known for writing about centering prayer.

He had a great way with words.

He reckoned the whole purpose of religion, every religion for that matter, was to expand people's ability to do good by liberating them.

He argued that that was what Jesus did - free people from their pain, their sin, their "uncleanness," and even their deaths, then sent them back to their families and to society to live in relationship and live lives of freedom and wholeness.

After his death someone described him as "a devoted student of Jesus and a lover of God ... who helped people connect to an inner stillness and experience of God that liberated them from egoic strongholds - so they could become free and whole"
(R Rohr 30/10/20).

May we continue to become devoted students of Jesus and lovers of God.
May we consent to God's dealing with our own ego.
That we might become ever more free to love.
In Jesus' name.
Amen.