

30 October 2011

Reflecting on God's Word

Reading : Matthew 23:1-12 (NT page 991-992)

Reader: Jennifer Sutherland

Background to the reading

In our reading Jesus is accusing the Pharisees and the scholars of the Law of practicing what they preach. It is a good question why Matthew's Gospel singles them out. Scholars believe that it is maybe because the first readers of Matthew's Gospel suffered their abuse of the Law of Moses. The Pharisees were a movement of several thousand pious Jewish men who sought to interpret the law carefully and according to the traditions of previous generations of the pious. They had no political power in Jesus' day but were highly respected and thus influential among the larger population. They emphasized their own version of purity rules and looked forward to the resurrection of the dead.

The scribes or the scholars of the Mosaic Law were a distinct group of people who were respected because of their knowledge of the Law.

Sometimes these men would be called “rabbi”. This title were to be used in a unsystematic way for people who studied the Law of Moses until after the temple was destroyed in 70 AD when it became a title of the scholars of the Mosaic Law.

In this passage Jesus criticizes them for not living their faith. Their faith became a show, an achievement of following various traditions with regard to what they wear and how they act in public. Instead of living their faith, and being servants of love, they like to be important in the eyes of their society. They regarded them as very important because they believed that their traditions were rooted in Moses’ own teaching and fancied themselves Moses’ successors for their own generation.

They made a show of their “religion” by following all the commandments in the Old Testament specific those

who instructed them to keep the Law and follow God's commandments. Phylacteries were pouches or boxes containing scrolls of parchment on which the Jews wrote certain portions of the Law and bound them on their foreheads and their left arms close to their hearts during morning and evening prayers. They were originally called *phulaktēria*, places of preservation, because they reminded the Jews to keep the Law. However, the Jews in our Lord's day came to regard them as amulets or charms which would keep or preserve them from evil. However in our reading it seems as if they took this command a little bit too far by enlarging the boxes for everyone to see that they really take the Law serious. Another form of the phylactery consisted of two rolls of parchment, on which the same texts were written, enclosed in a case of black calfskin. This was worn on the left arm near the elbow, to which it was bound by a thong. It was called the "*Tephillah* on the arm."

The practice is based on Deut 6:8. These passages were then recited as part of the prayers.

They also wore elaborate fringes/tassels on their outer garments for everyone to see and admire. Fringes or tassels were a common decoration on Near Eastern garments. The oldest rule about fringes in the OT says simply, 'You shall make yourself tassels on the four corners of your cloak with which you cover yourself' (Deut. 22:12). The more elaborate command in Num. 15:38-40 says that the tassels shall be of blue cord and function as a reminder to obey the commandments. In the Gospels the woman with the hemorrhage touches the fringe of Jesus' garment (Matt. 9:20; Luke 8:44) and other sick wish to do likewise (Mark 6:56; Matt. 14:36). Jesus criticizes Pharisees for hypocrisy in wearing flamboyant fringes (Matt. 23:5).

Seating was critical at banquets. The most prominent seats in the synagogue probably varied in this period before synagogue architecture was standardized; one first-century synagogue seems to suggest a lack of seating rank. But honoured seats would have normally been in the most visible place, probably nearest the "bimah", the platform for the reading of the Law. Jesus

is saying they like to have prominent seats for everyone to see them.

Greetings (“Peace be with you”) were so important socially that specific rules developed how to greet whom when. Greetings were an essential courtesy in Greek and Jewish cultures. Not to hail a person superior in understanding the Law was a grievous insult. Marketplaces were the most crowded places in town. “Rabbi” means “my master”.

Jesus criticized the Pharisees and the scholars of the Law for making their own laws just as important as God’s laws. But whilst making and prescribing these laws they did not even adhere to them, themselves. Jesus also criticised them for not being honest to God. Instead of glorifying God they only tried to be glorified themselves. To them, their faith was religion and just a show!

I am sure this text must have meant quite a lot to the first listeners of Matthew’s Gospel. It must have helped

them to focus on their faith in Jesus Christ and not the religious traditions they were forced to keep. On the other hand I think the religious leaders found this criticism of Jesus quite shocking. No-one in that society ever criticized people with more status than they did.

CH4 694:1, 2, 3

Brother, sister let me serve you

Sermon

The text verse for the sermon is verse 11: “The greatest among you will be your servant.”

When I read this text I thought that many people will start criticising clergy wearing robes and having titles like reverend or “father”. I must also admit that this text has been quoted to me many a time by people who does nae come to church saying: “This text is speaking about you and the elders who sit in the front pews”. “You are the hypocrites Jesus is talking about!”

But after studying the text and rethinking it, I came to another conclusion. This criticism of Jesus is not against

wearing clothes or people sitting in the front pews. No his criticism is against people who have or hold on to “religion” and not living their faith in the Lord Jesus.

But is there is a difference between having religion and having faith? Yes there is a big difference and this is exactly what Jesus was trying to portray. People who have religion believe in the church of Jesus Christ while people who have faith believe in Jesus Christ who is the head of the church. People who have religion live their love because that is the right way of being a good citizen while people who have faith love unconditionally because God loved them first.

People who have religion will come regularly to church to fulfil a certain role or position while people who have faith come because God’s Holy Spirit directed them to come.

Faith unlike religion is not an intellectual or moral or ethical exercise. It is not a show or a mask to put on. No it is a strong conviction that there is no other way to God

the Father except through Jesus Christ the Lord. Faith is the commitment to serve and love others more than you love yourself like Jesus did. It is walking an extra distance. It is to love with God's help those who makes your life miserable, those who breaks your heart every time you are in their presence.

Faith is the knowledge that Christ has opened the door to all who will walk through it regardless of their spiritual condition. This is a faith that knows, all of our sins, past, present, and future are not only covered, but are altogether erased and forever forgotten. It is a faith where God transform us into entirely new people through His Holy Spirit, destroying the power of sin in our lives.

Faith comes from the heart while religion is an outward show. It was Mahatma Gandhi who was almost persuaded to become a Christian, but decided against it saying, "I would become a follower of Christ if it wasn't for those who claim to follow him."

May we follow Christ and not the church. May we obey the biggest commandment namely to love instead of following man made traditions. May we have faith in the Lord Jesus to know that we are redeemed by his blood thorough his grace and mercy. May we have faith that move mountains and help us to focus not on what we can do but what God does and not to focus on our powers and might but to trust in the Almighty God!

May we live our faith for everyone to see – not as a show but a genuine conviction that we are nothing without the grace of God through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ Amen.