

Do we show people what God is like?

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Revd Dr Sarah Macneil

Pentecost 20A, 30 October 2011

Joshua 3: 7-17; Psalm 107:1-7; 33-37; 1 Thessalonians 3: 5-13; Matthew 23: 1-12 (37-39)

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Some decades ago, when Australia was making the transition from the imperial to the metric system of measurement, there was a school in Tasmania that was being refurbished. The refurbishment included a significant expansion in the number of classrooms and this involved the addition of a second storey to an existing building. But when everything had been ordered and the builders got down to work, they found that the second storey did not quite fit—all the calculations were oh-so-slightly wrong. So, the wrong amount of concrete had been ordered, the wrong size windows, the wrong amount of bricks and timber. It was a shemozzle, and an expensive one at that. (Not to mention embarrassing for all Tasmanians. Indeed, I feel I can only tell this story because I am a Tasmanian myself.)

When the inevitable inquiry took place it was found that someone, somewhere, had designed the second storey using the plans for the first storey as the starting point. Nothing wrong with that, but, unfortunately, he had then failed to make the proper conversion from the old plans (which were in imperial units) and had also failed to measure what was actually already there (in either imperial or metric). And no one had picked up the mistake until it was too late.

All of which just goes to show that if you've got it wrong, you've got it wrong. As the scribes and the Pharisees in today's Gospel reading had it wrong in their interpretation of the Law.

In Jewish tradition the Law consists not just of the 10 commandments so familiar to us, but of 613 commandments, all found in the Torah, the first 5 books of the Bible. Of these 613 commandments, 365 are negative and 248 are positive. Centuries of careful, scholarly interpretation hang off these commandments, forming a complex system of law—what to do and what not to do in almost every imaginable circumstance.

This had (and has for Jews today) profound significance. For the Law, in Jewish thinking, is not simply a set of rules: it is a way of life, a way of life designed to increase the spirituality in one's life. It is a path to God and the rules and practices that affect every aspect of life turn the most trivial and mundane things, such as eating and getting dressed, into acts of great religious and spiritual depth.

Clearly, those who teach the Law in Jewish society have an awesome responsibility. In Jesus' day, these were the scribes and the Pharisees. Today's equivalents would probably be the lawyers, the theologians and the politicians. In this Gospel reading Jesus points to terrible flaws in the way the scribes and the Pharisees are teaching the Law. He accuses them of emphasizing the minutiae of the Law at the expense of the overarching principles. They were teaching about the trees, not the forest. So, heavy burdens of obligation were put on people who could not manage them: poor people were required to pay onerous temple taxes, for example; while compassion and mercy seemed to be forgotten.

This stands in stark contrast to Jesus' own approach of love and compassion. Last week we read the passage immediately before this one in Matthew's Gospel. When asked which commandment is the greatest, Jesus replies, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind; and your neighbour as yourself'. I am sure that it is no accident that the writer of the Gospel, when ordering all the material, put these two passages so close together, making the point that

compassion and love dictate the way Scripture should apply, not a kind of legalistic bureaucracy which assumes that God is a control freak.

Time after time Jesus' teaching and actions subverted the religious system and structures which the Jewish people had erected, no doubt from the best of motives, around the Law, handed to Moses by God as they journeyed through the wilderness from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the promised land.

Time after time, Jesus tried to get through to them that what they had actually done was travel from slavery in Egypt to slavery in the Promised Land; the difference was that in Egypt they were enslaved by the Pharaoh and in Israel they had enslaved *themselves* by religious absolutism. Here he is pointing to the role played by the scribes and the Pharisees in that enslavement.

But that's not all. Jesus' critique of the Scribes and Pharisees continues. 'Do what they say', he says, 'not what they do'. For what they do runs counter to what they say. They give guidance that they do not follow themselves, presenting themselves as something they are not, exalting themselves, and relishing the perks of their position.

In this, of course, they are not alone. Everyday life gives us countless examples of hypocrisy, from the very minor to gobsmackingly major instances of self-serving dishonesty. From parents teaching their children not to lie and then telling little white lies themselves, through to the financially or sexually predatory behaviour of some Christian leaders, or to political leaders making promises they never intend to keep in order to be elected. As it was in Jesus' day, so it is today.

And it matters. As we tentatively ask what this passage might mean for us today, two millennia and half a world away, I don't think we can just ignore it. Each day we are faced with choices that cumulatively knit the fabric of our beings. Choices about how we behave, how we respond, how we live. Whether we act with integrity or not. Whether we try to live the faith we profess. Habits of lying, malicious comment, of gossip, of bullying, of selfishness, of self-promotion and puffery are corrosive of relationship and of the spirit.

This is about the quality of our life together, about the quality of our discipleship. But the ripples go way beyond our communities of faith.

As our society is rapidly becoming post-Christian, we regularly meet people who are completely unchurched people who have never been inside a church, who have never received religious instruction in school and who do not have any Christian friends or colleagues.

They will have heard about Christianity, probably with a negative slant, but there is a world of difference between hearing about something and actually experiencing it, actually coming to know people who live by its precepts. As Christians in the world, we are often the first real contact non-Christians have with the faith. We are, as the apostle Paul put it 2000 years ago, ambassadors of Christ.

It is an awesome responsibility. Inasmuch as we are able to live godly lives, we will be the bearers of Christ's light of love in the world. Of course, we will fail; but with all our little idiosyncrasies, our sinfulness, we are the body of Christ. There is a sense in which every community of faith is a foretaste of the kingdom of heaven.

It seems an extravagant claim. Indeed, a worrying claim—can we frail human beings do this? Of course, we are not perfect. Indeed, there is no grouping of human beings that is perfect. We are a work in progress, so to speak.

But a serious question for every Christian and for every Christian group, indeed, perhaps the most serious question, is this: as individuals and as community, do we show people what God is like? From what we do, the way we relate to each other and what we say, do people get a sense of God's grace, God's love and God's mercy? Amen.