

Our passage from Matthew this evening is quite the polemic. There are a few things one needs to keep in mind in order to understand it. Firstly Matthew's Gospel was written somewhere between forty and fifty and possibly slightly more years after the crucifixion, and ten or more years after the destruction of the Temple. I remind you that we have no scripture extant that was written during Jesus' earthly life. The letters of Paul and possibly the Epistle of James are the earliest material in the Christian scriptures dating from approximately 50 of the Common Era. Paul's last letter was 2nd Timothy written as Paul awaited his execution at the direction of the Emperor Nero in the late 60's. Almost certainly before any of the Gospels were written.

Secondly, the Christian scriptures were written to address the realities of the time, so it is important to understand something of those realities in order to understand the message and to understand how that message might have meaning today. Matthew's Gospel was addressed to Jewish followers of Jesus at a time of great upheaval and division among the Jews. As you have heard many times, the Romans destroyed the second Temple in the year 70 and massacred the priestly caste. For a religion that was centred around Temple worship, with the Holy of Holies understood to be the earthly home of God, it is impossible to overestimate the enormous dislocation the Temple's destruction was on 1st century Judaism. The religion had to be completely reoriented around a network of synagogues and the teachings of rabbis. Those who accomplished that reorientation were the Pharisees. It was they who had the network of synagogues and a set of teachings that entirely revolved around absolute adherence to the law both written and oral. They were not dependent on the Temple. They set the foundation of the Judaism that continues today.

Thirdly, the Pharisees did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah and perceived him to be blasphemous for asserting who he was; hence, their network of synagogues by the time Matthew was writing his gospel were less and less a home for Jewish followers of the Way.

These three considerations go a long way to explain our reading this evening. Of all the Gospels, Matthew's is the most vehement in having Jesus criticize the Pharisees. Because by the time Matthew was writing the break from the synagogue of Jewish followers of Jesus was well underway. They didn't so much jump, as they were pushed. The rigid adherence to law, was antithetical to the developing Christian theology, but also equally important, there was no place in the synagogue for the growing number of Gentile followers of Jesus. Matthew's Gospel is unique among the Gospels in that any time the Pharisees are mentioned it is with derision. In Chapter 23, Matthew has Jesus condemn the Pharisees most fiercely in order to strengthen Jewish followers of Jesus to continue with the early church as opposed to remaining within the synagogue which in time would have required them to renounce Jesus. It was also very important to Matthew and his fellow Jewish believers to assert that Jesus is the culmination of Jewish history because he is the Messiah.

The other Gospels are critical of the Pharisees but much less vehemently. Mark was critical of their rigid adherence to the law, and he portrays the Pharisees as plotting with the Herodians to eliminate Jesus, but he was writing in an earlier less fraught time when the divisions were less defined – possibly before the destruction of the Temple. Luke was a Gentile and so he had no place in the synagogue. He is critical of the Pharisees self-righteousness and of their corruption – pious on the outside but greed and wickedness on the inside. But he does describe Jesus as dining with Pharisees and shows that it was some Pharisees who warned Jesus of the Herodian plot against him. John, although a Jew, was very significantly Hellenised. He was writing in Ephesus late in the 1st century or early in the 2nd when the division was complete. He still presents the Pharisees as rule bound, but he also introduces Nicodemus, a Pharisee who seeks Jesus. So Matthew is by far and away the most vehement against the Pharisees because of his audience and because he was writing at a time when the division was clear, but the resolution still not confirmed.

So is there a message for us in all this? After 2 millennia of church history we can think of any number of times that the adjective pharisaical could be used to describe so called Christian pronouncements – rigid adherence to rules with no regard for mercy or for love. Think of all the excommunications, burnings at the stake, shunning, shaming, and excoriating of people who are deemed to have strayed. The church has elected for judgment more often than mercy, for rules more often than meeting human needs, for outward signs more than inward grace.

For those of us in the Anglican Church in this Diocese, it would appear that the pharisaical church has been vanquished. I have a license to lead services of the word from the Bishop and her permission to preach to you. The very idea that I have her permission is staggering in itself “her permission!” When I first went to church in this Diocese 54 years ago a woman priest, leave alone a woman bishop would have been seen as an anathema. I would have been welcomed in the church as a gay man as long as I was so far in the closet that who I really was could be completely ignored. Much has changed in 52 years, just not fast enough. I often say that if all the people who have left the church or have never been knew who we are now, they would join us. The change and progress that has happened is not universally welcomed, and could indeed, some day be reversed. That is why we must ever be vigilant in ensuring that outcasts and sinners are always welcome here. In all the years I have been active in the church I couldn’t possibly remember all the discussions about becoming more inclusive that met with a response, *You are probably right but we are not quite ready*. I have never found a place in the Christian scriptures where Jesus says to the poor and the marginalized, *just be patient until the rich and comfortable are ready*. Are we members of a church that identifies more with the leader who said, *Let him who is without sin cast the first stone*, or with a leader who is alleged to have said, *You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell?* Which sounds more like Jesus to you? Amen