

Sermon 25 August 2019 'It's all about people.'

Luke 13:10-17

Once again we see a conflict of viewpoint between Jesus and the authorities, in this case, the leader of the synagogue. It doesn't state that he was a Pharisee, but in all probability he was because the Pharisees were very involved in the running of the synagogue. The clash between Jesus and the Pharisees is well documented and I have commented on this on several occasions.

On this occasion Jesus has healed a woman who had been crippled for a long time, 18 years. He heals her on the Sabbath and the leader of the synagogue publicly criticises him for working on the Sabbath. Jesus's response is to call into question the validity of the law. He points out that it is okay to tend to an animal on the Sabbath and so surely it must be okay to tend to a woman in need. Not for the first time, Jesus levels the accusation of hypocrisy at the Pharisees. Once again, Jesus makes the point that observance of rules and regulations to the exclusion of compassion and kindness is not God's way. The point is this, the Christian faith is not about a set of rules and regulations, it is about a relationship. It is about a relationship with God, with Jesus, that translates into a relationship with those around us. It has to, otherwise that relationship is not what it should be. It's all about people! If our faith revolves around a set of rules, the joy of loving God and of loving people flies out the window. Unfortunately, in our Christian religion this all too often is the case. We profess to be Christians but our priority is with procedure, accompanied with judgment, rather than with simply caring for one another. What upset Jesus is that the Pharisees judged people according to the stringency with which they lived by regulations. Their judgment had nothing to do with how they treated people, and this flew in the face of God's love as advocated by Jesus.

Not for the first time, Jesus vehemently labels the Pharisees as hypocrites, accusing them of on the one hand proclaiming to love God but on the other hand disregarding God's love through their obsession with their religious laws. There is a wonderful passage in Matthew 23 where Jesus calls them hypocrites no fewer than five times, as well as other delightful terms such as snakes, vipers and blind fools.

It really did annoy him that the way they conducted themselves was in direct contrast to what God expects of us,

and yet they held themselves up to be the guardians of God's code and covenant. And the point is this, are we not just repeating this hypocrisy? Have we not learnt?

I want to quote to you what the great Billy Graham wrote.

*'Almost every week I hear from someone who says they don't want anything to do with Christians because "Christians are just a bunch of hypocrites." All too often they tell of someone they know who claims to be a Christian but whose life belies that.'* Almost every week he heard that!

It is very sad but unfortunately Christians don't always get good press and the perception out there is not always what we would like it to be. John Perkins, who wrote the most wonderful book, 'Dream With Me', recounts the time when two young people he knew well carried out some informal research. They were preparing a video clip for a worship service and their goal was to capture people's responses to the word 'Christian'. They hit the streets with a video camera and asked people to say the first word that came to mind in response to each word they gave them. They began with 'snow', 'eagles', 'teenagers' and then finally, 'Christian.' The response to the word 'Christian' included 'fake', 'judgmental', 'hypocrites' and 'boring.' What was equally thought-provoking was what was not said. Not once were the words 'grace', 'forgiveness', 'compassion', or 'love' used. Not once!

What does that tell us? First of all, we are all very human.

None of us are perfect and we all have our faults. However, it is disconcerting that the image out there is of such a negative complexion.

Secondly, it tells us that we have a monumental challenge on our hands to change that perception. Last Sunday I spoke of creating a corner of God's kingdom here in Flat Bush. That must be our dream; that must be our priority. A new church and facilities are great but unless people are first, second and third priorities, that dream will not be realised. It's all about people!

There is another point that needs to be made here and that is, if we put people first, we experience a sense of fulfilment and even happiness.

There is the story of the anthropologist who proposed this game to a group of African children. He placed a basket of fruits near a tree, made them stand 100 metres away and announced that whoever reaches the basket first gets all the fruit.

When he said, 'Ready, set, go', the children grabbed each other's hands and ran towards the tree together, divided the

fruit among themselves and proceeded to enjoy the fruit as one happy group.

The anthropologist asked them why they did that. They said, 'Ubuntu,' which in their language meant, 'How can you be happy when others are sad?' Literally, Ubuntu means, 'I am because we are.'

The crucial word here is 'we.' The children's feelings, whatever those feelings might be, are determined by the feelings of the kids around them. If the others are sad, they themselves will feel sad. It is called empathy or compassion. In this case, by ensuring the others are happy, they themselves feel happy.

Jesus, by charging us to love one another, ensures that we ourselves will feel happy and fulfilled, and also that as a community we feel good. It's all about people!

I want to finish by referring back to Jesus's gripe with the Pharisees and their obsession with rules and regulations, and I want to quote from William Barclay, well-known Biblical commentator and theologian. He said this, 'Strangely enough, the worship of systems commonly invades the Church. There are many people who are more concerned with the method of church governance than they are with the worship of God and the service of others. It is all too tragically true that more trouble and strife arise in churches over legalistic details of procedure than over any other thing.'

Reverend Warner Wilder