

Sermon 21 August 2022 'It's all about people.'

Luke 13:10-17

Once again, we see a conflict 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 responsible for 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' response is to call into question the validity of the law. He points out that it is ok to tend to an animal on the Sabbath and so surely it must be ok 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 should not be about a set of rules and regulations; it should be about a relationship. It should be 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.

On more than one occasion, Paul tells us that we are made right with God through faith, not by obeying rules and regulations. I give you one example. *'So we are made right with God through faith and not by obeying the law.'* Romans 3:28.

Unfortunately, in our Christian religion all too often this is the case. We profess to be faithful Christians but our priority lies with procedure, accompanied by 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 the 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 though 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 guardians of God's code and covenant. My question is this – are we not repeating the same mistake? Are we not repeating this same hypocrisy?

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 me 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', 'hypocrite', 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? Firstly, it tells us that we are all very human. None of us are perfect – far from it – and we all have our faults.

Secondly, it tells us that we have a monumental challenge on our hands to change that perception. I have often spoken about our dream to create a corner of God's kingdom here in Flat Bush. We must hold on to that dream. But let me say this, a new church and community facilities are great but unless we make people first, second and third priorities, that dream will not be realised. It's all about people. It's all about empathy and compassion.

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 others are sad, they themselves feel sad. It is called empathy or compassion. In this case, by ensuring the others are happy, they themselves feel happy. Shades of what we have been talking about in recent weeks – helping others makes us feel good.

I want to finish by referring back to Jesus' 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.'

My friends, I repeat, for our relationship with God, and that by definition includes our worship, is to be meaningful and relevant, our priority must be people. This is precisely what Jesus was trying to get through to the leader of the synagogue, and precisely what he is saying to us today.

Reverend Warner Wilder