

LOOKING AHEAD: SUNDAY NOVEMBER 5th

Reading: Matthew 23: 1 – 12 [22nd Sunday after Pentecost]

Alternative (see below): Matthew 5: 1 – 12 [All Saints Sunday]

Oh-oh! There's trouble afoot. This is not going to end well. A reminder – chapter 22 has just finished with a further challenge to the Pharisees about whose 'son' the Messiah is. It concludes with the words "*No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions*" [verse 46].

Matthew 23 begins a stern series of warnings and pronouncements of judgement. Scholar Eugene M Boring in the New Interpreter's Bible Commentary identifies five 'major speeches' of Jesus in Matthew [Introduction, Matthew, page 112]. This section begins the fifth of them, the so-called "Judgement Discourse", which extends to this and the following two chapters. Boring notes that the 'then' [Greek: τότε] which opens this chapter is a word the Gospel uses to signal a "new beginning" [Matthew, page 428].

The first twelve verses of this discourse are a series of 'warnings'. But note who is warned. Whilst these words are about the "Scribes and Pharisees" (Matthew lumps the two quite different religious parties into one), it is "*the crowds and his disciples*" who are addressed here [verse 1]. This is not a tirade against errant religious opponents. It is a "*Be careful not to be like them*" message.

In fact of course, the Pharisaic outlook and religious practices likely developed after Jesus had long left the scene. In Jesus' time and until the Year 70 AD the Jerusalem Temple demanded central place in the living of the Jewish religion. Jesus himself participated in the festivals there and had his own critique of some of the corruption that he witnessed there. But it was only after the Roman army invaded and burnt the Temple to the ground in that year that the Pharisees developed their distinctive thought. The many sects that defined themselves in ritual separation and rules of piety faced a dilemma without the temple: How, then, shall we live? As Eugene Boring (above) describes their challenge: "*They were concerned that Judaism not become homogenised into the surrounding world after the destruction of their nations; shrine*" [page 431].

It was the Pharisees who said, in effect, take these things into your daily lives, into your homes. Bear reminders of the requirements of the Law as leather boxes strapped to your heads for thinking and hanging tassels on your clothing for dressing. In the prophetic line, Jesus in calling people to a genuine lifestyle as response to God, rather than displays of exclusion and religious superiority probably had some sympathy with such an approach.

Indeed, it is only later as tensions developed between new faith communities such as the one Matthew addresses and the synagogue that this antipathy between the followers of Jesus and the existing religious leadership developed.

Matthew's warning against "*the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees*" is three-fold: (1) they are hypocritical in that they fail to do what they say, (2) they place burdens on others that they themselves are not prepared to meet, and (3) they seek to 'parade' their goodness and piety before others rather than living it humbly. Wanting to occupy 'Moses seat' in the synagogue was to assume the stature of religious authority. Instead Jesus warns, in an echo of sayings of discipleship that we saw gathered at the close of chapter 15, true leadership is humble and giving.

Rather than enter a game of ‘goodies ‘and ‘baddies’ here, I wonder how we consider we might score against such criteria? If the teaching to Matthew’s community here is in the negative, then we can easily hear the summons to be genuine and authentic in keeping to our ‘word’, to serve to make life and faith easier for others, rather than more difficult, and to live out faith in attitudes of grace and humility.

[And note – another opportunity of this text for “All Saints” might be to recognise and honour those ‘saints’ in our lives and communities who have demonstrated such Gospel qualities].

Alternative: Matthew 5: 1 – 12 [All Saints Sunday]

There are a different (complementary) set of readings offered for churches which will observe “All Saints Sunday”, the first after All Saints Day on November 1.

These include the vision of the final in-gathering from the Revelation of John on the Island of Patmos. It offers the God-given reward of the righteous, the picture of the great multitude dressed in white robes together holding the hope of the end of hunger and the wiping away of tears.

I have chosen for these reflections to go with the specific reading set for “All Saints Day” – the first Sunday after November 1. That is not the ‘day of all the Saints’, but the day where all are saints. It allows for a celebration of goodness in people in our midst! Or, in accord with the preceding, people who have ‘blessed us’.

The chosen Gospel text of the lectionary for the celebration of All Saints is the beatitudes from Matthew chapter 5. These are a series of pronouncements about who is ‘blessed’. They are hardly, as often thought, an encouragement to go out and seek these things in one’s life: mourning, sadness and persecution. Rather, they are the affirmation of God’s continuing, even special, hold on us in the midst of all that life delivers,

The Beatitudes are actually a category of Proverb which provide the answer of leaders, teachers and rabbis to the question: “*Who do you say is blessed ... who are the ones who receive this happiness?*” Much depends here on how we understand the word often translated as ‘blessed’. In Latin this word is ‘*beati*’ ... that’s how they’re titled. ‘Happy’ doesn’t get close to covering the richness of this. Rather, such translation suggests a shallow emotion given rise by other circumstances. In the Greek, the original word is *makaroi*, which gives rise to the words ‘joy’, ‘fortunate’, ‘blessed’. The original language lends itself to ‘saved are you if’ In the fullest sense of where the hope of God is to be found.

The New Interpreter’s Bible notes that each beatitude contains an ‘are’ and a ‘will’: “(each) begins in the present tense – “*blessed are...*” – and moves to the future tense – “*for they will ...*” [page 180]. The beatitudes hold this tension between a state which already is and one that is to come. Scholars have termed this the ‘eschatological tension’, evident underlying the whole Gospel message, whose hope is now and present and yet is to come.

Linguistically, the Beatitudes – like any Blessing – are a form of speech not to describe, but to create, to effect a certain condition. If I say to you now, “Bless you”, then by my very words, you are blessed! So the beatitudes are not an encouragement to, “Go out and find cause to mourn”, but rather, the affirmation that, “if you are in mourning, or if you struggle in poverty, know that my blessing, my happiness, my joy are still with you”. Jesus is not teaching about blessing, he’s offering his own!

Further, actions based on these words will bring into being a world that looks like them ... a world where the lowly are lifted up, where mercy triumphs over judgement, where the sorrowing are comforted ...

The beatitudes then are signs of God's new world; they announce that this is not the end of the story, so don't settle in and feel comfortable with things as they are because God has another order. They are what biblical scholars neatly term 'reversals'; turning things on themselves, to quote the NIB "Jesus, who reversed the general value system."

And how do we 'bless' another? By our words or by our deeds? Certainly by both. But how much attention is given to the potential to bless of our words? Clearly the saints – and that's all of us – are called to peace-making and not revenge, loving and goodness.

The future tense of the beatitudes, New Interpreter's Bible commentary on Matthew says reminds us, *"Christianity is not a scheme to reduce stress, lose weight, advance in one's career, or preserve one from illness. Christian faith, instead, is a way of living based on the firm and sure hope that meekness is the way of God, that righteousness and peace will finally prevail, and that God's future will be a time of mercy and not cruelty. So, blessed are those who live this life now, even when such a life seems foolish, for they will, in the end, be vindicated by God"* [page 181].

THEMES: God's way, faithfulness, values (what's important)
