

Sermon for Parish Mass November 5th 2017

Readings: Malachi 1:14-2:2,8-10,1Thessalonians 2:7-9,13 Matthew 23:1-12.

Good morning, and Happy All Saints' Day

What makes a saint?.

Two clergymen bumped into each other one day and one noticed straightaway that the other was looking far from his usual cheery self. 'Whatever is the matter?' he asked, and his friend replied, 'I am very annoyed and very disappointed because I think, in fact I am sure, that one of my parishioners has stolen my bicycle.'

'You know what you should do,' said the first clergyman, 'next Sunday preach on the ten commandments and when you get to *Thou shalt not steal*, look firmly round the congregation, see who looks guilty and tackle him after the service.'

When next they met, the first parson asked his friend if he had got his bike back. 'Yes', came the reply.

'And did you preach on the commandments, and did the thief show his guilt when you got to *Thou shalt not steal*, and give you the bike back?'

'Not quite', said the other, 'I did preach on the commandments and I did get my bike back, because I recalled where I had left it when I got to *Thou shalt not commit adultery*.'

I tell that story because it seems to chime in with what is said about the weaknesses and deficiencies of religious leaders in this morning's readings. Though it does dodge one significant issue from the gospel passage. For faith poses enough tough and demanding questions already, surely, without adding another one, namely 'What on earth is a phylactery?'

Well the answer is that they were (and I think among some observant Jews still are) very finely made little cases containing passages of scripture written on parchment and suitable as focusses for prayer, and they were worn particularly by the Pharisees on the forehead or the left arm fixed to leather straps, and the broader the strap the more visible they were, so the clearer they were as an outward sign of your status, your piety and your prayerfulness.

Status, piety and prayerfulness. I have a feeling that you get a saint if you mix those three ingredients, in the right proportions and in the right way. Here goes then, with the Great Chiswick Hagiological Bake-off.

We are blessed here in having the ministry of a team of clergy whose hard work, attitudes and values are much closer to those of St Paul and his team in the second reading, than to those condemned in the first lesson and the gospel by Jesus and Malachi. And we do need to support, uphold and pray for them so that those blessings we enjoy should continue.

Perhaps Simon, Eileen and Alan and indeed all their colleagues, might well at times understandably sigh for the good old days when what the Vicar, or the Bishop of London, or the Archbishop of Canterbury said was automatically, indeed deferentially taken to heart and obeyed, as was what the Doctor or the Policeman, the Teacher, the Councillor, the MP, the Bank Manager, the Journalist, the Solicitor, the Judge or even your Parents said.

But now we who work in or have to deal with the concept of authority know that authority has to be earned and frequently re-earned and that those good old days are over, for good or ill, and it may be for good, in both senses - of time and advantage – for there are always risks in the automatic assumption of status and authority, in that that automatic assumption can lead to a sense of entitlement and complacency which stifle intelligent thinking and careful

problem solving, and in the end even destroy integrity and charity. This week marks the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's declaration of the need for the Church of his day to reform; a need which in part grew out of just this complacent feeling of its entitlement to status and to unfettered power over people's lives, and this is certainly the complaint that both the prophet Malachi and Our Lord are making against the religious leaders of their times.

Biblical scholars say that what lies at the heart and origin of Matthew's Gospel is what might have been Matthew's own collection of the *logia*, the memorably short yet powerful sayings of Jesus. Matthew and those who took up his collection took those *logia* and selected and arranged them so as to make clear Jesus' position on the relationship between Himself and God, between Himself and His followers, that He was indeed the Messiah foretold in the Old Testament and between those followers and God, that their new faith must make their lives different, different from the ways of the Jewish communities that they came out of as well as those of the pagans around them. The Church's ambassadors to the world outside must not simply wear their status and their piety outwardly in entitlement, but industriously and effectively in humility.

The three *logia* at the heart of this morning's Gospel, are in fact the heart and kernel of our Faith, because they are to do with identity, namely 'You must not be called Rabbi', 'You must not be called Instructor', and 'You must not call any man on earth your Father.'

To Judaism, as a faith built on learning from the book and a society built on the nuclear family, these *logia*, as Jesus no doubt perfectly intended them to be, are pretty shocking. But in each case the initial attention-grabbing shock is followed by a second sentence of explanation.

Not calling any man on earth your father, or by a very reasonable extension of the word's meaning your ancestor, might not be an attack on the nuclear family structure but rather on *all* social structures based on ancestry, nobility and descent. The Jews and their leaders in particular claimed status in that they could, and often did, say that Abraham was their father, and no doubt it was their sense of entitlement to approval by descent rather than achievement that Jesus was getting at.

But this works on a broader and more modern level too. I don't mean just that you can't claim privilege because your ancestors came over with William the Conqueror, or because you are one of the 'Hampshire Ponsonby-Smallpieces', or even because you live in W4 not W3.

'Identity' is a concept vital to everyone because it is about one's sense of oneself, of where one belongs and how one is treated. We have these days quite an alphabet soup of letters fixing people's identities. I confess it came as a surprise to naïve old me to discover that L.G.B.T. did not after all stand for the London General Buses and Tramways Company- and that did lead to a few misunderstandings at the bus stop - but three cheers or more for those identifying letters, which now I think have grown to L.G.B.T.Q.I.A., not to mention B.A.M.E., for having been vital and crucial in lessening misunderstanding, prejudice, exclusion and downright persecution of those who had not seemed to fit into what was thought 'normal'.

But, and this might be what I am setting you as your post-sermon homework, (though this is what John Humphrys will say is 'deeply, deeply boring'), just think how things might be if the only group - identifying letters that counted were H. A. M. I. G. I.', standing for 'Human And Made in God's Image'. How would that play out in terms of social structure and social mobility, in terms of gender relations, in terms of national and international politics and diplomacy, in terms of all forms of ethics and morality? But that is what Jesus is surely saying here, when He points out that everyone should really look to God as their *and everyone else's* father.

If you see God as your true and ultimate father and creator, and hold on to the notion of *all* people being made in His image, it is harder to exclude God from the way you think about and treat both yourself and those around you. Perhaps paradoxically in view of their theological leadership, it is just that *exclusion* of the reality of God's nature that underlies Jesus' criticism of the religious leaders of His time for the pursuit of worldly status for their piety. And that connects with His advice to His disciples, his students, on not being called Rabbi, Teacher or Instructor.

Judaism in Jesus' day rested on legalistic, academic interpretation of ancient texts by the Teachers and the Rabbis. There would inevitably, necessarily be discussions and dispute about meaning and interpretation. But equally inevitably, human nature being what it is, teachers and Rabbis would be prone to division and to collecting students and followers who would take their teachers' sides in those divisions and disputes. You can see where this is leading - to the splits not only between ancient Jewish theologians but between Protestants and Catholics ever since Luther's time, and thankfully now faint echoes of which we 'remember, remember' on the 5th of November, between liberal and traditionalist Anglicans, and for that matter between Hindus and Muslims seventy years ago at the partition of India, between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims today and between Christians, Jews and Muslims almost throughout history and certainly since the Crusades.

But what if you stopped excluding your and everyone's Father from those disputes and controversies? Might it not at least mean that each faith's, each denomination's or each theologian's view of God's will and way is simply, so to say, one facet of a single very large, very, very beautiful and infinitely priceless diamond?

The third of Jesus' logia in this morning's Gospel passage seems to me to hold all His thoughts together. He asks us to call no one their 'Instructor', because we have only one and He is the Messiah. The Greek word St Matthew uses for 'instructor' is *kathegetes* and its broad range of meanings and possible translations includes 'guide' and 'leader' as well as 'teacher'. You could use it for anyone who teaches skills as well as knowledge, and even for the head of a philosophical school like Plato or Aristotle. It takes the idea of instruction hidden in the word Rabbi and broadens it out beyond those who taught the faith in the Jewish community, and gives it a decidedly universal coverage.

So what does Jesus the Messiah, instruct and how? He does not seek a status which excludes God's true nature. How could He; he was and is God and as St Paul says, 'His status was divine, yet He did not cling to equality with God, but took on Himself the nature of a servant.' He could not avoid including God in all that He said and did to, for and with people, and surely in those long quiet times when Jesus went away to pray and be close to His father in Heaven, he must have brought God time and time again the needs of those He lived among. That example of bringing our neighbours' needs to God in prayer is a vital one to follow.

And Jesus took on the role of a servant.

Think about this if you will; what is the role of a servant? The role of a servant, any servant, from house-cleaners through dinner-ladies to all the P.A.'s to C.E.O.'s and the most civil of civil servants, is above all surely *to enhance the life of those he or she serves*. And is not that just what Jesus did and does? He did and does it by healing, by removing people's burdens of sin and guilt, by examples of practical service, from washing filthy feet to cooking breakfast on the lakeside, and by teaching people that life could best be lived in all its fulness by recognising that we and everyone are the children of a God who, as I have said before, is a Dad not a dictator, and that we are surrounded and upheld by a grace and love which God will not, cannot switch off, even if we choose to ignore it.

And Jesus excluded no one from His mission to bring life in all its fulness and enable everyone to reach the potential for that full life that God's love brings. He dined with tax

collectors (like St Matthew), and prostitutes, praised the faith of a Roman centurion and the active caring of a Samaritan businessman, and even talked theology to a Samaritan woman.

Ah, you will say, but He did pretty clearly exclude the Pharisees. Well, not entirely. You could see how He treats them in the Gospel today not a giving up on them, but just as the result of His frustration at their complacent, entitled, arrogant refusal to understand the truth. And there is one Pharisee at least whose skills, intelligence and energy He certainly saw, developed and used- one Pharisee so energetic and passionate in what might well now be thought of as religious fundamentalism that he was on the road to Damascus to put Christians there to death in the name of the one true God when Jesus met him and turned him round, and that was St Paul.

Serving, upholding, enabling and including; that is the way Jesus connected status, piety and prayerfulness.

And because that is the way saints are made, let's go and do we likewise.

Now, does anyone know where I left my bicycle?

Amen