

At The Edge of God's Glory

Matthew 23:1-12

Joshua 3:7-17

When Jesus told a parable he had a clever way of drawing people into the story and then turning things around so that we realise he is really talking about us. Think of the parable of the sower and the seed, where the disciples later learn that he is talking about them and how they listen to him. Think of the parable of the unforgiving servant, where Jesus draws us into the story and then turns around and says that if we do not forgive we cannot expect forgiveness.

It's a method that has been used elsewhere in the Bible. Think of the prophet Nathan who wants to confront David over what he has done in having Uriah the Hittite killed so that he can take Bathsheba to be his wife. Nathan is afraid to tell the King off directly: after all, he is the King. So he goes and tells a story about a poor man who has one little ewe lamb which he and his family love and cherish and treat as a pet. Then the man's rich neighbour has a guest come to him, and instead of killing one of his own, plentiful lambs, to feed his guest, he takes the poor man's one lamb and kills that instead. And Nathan asks the King what should be done. David pronounces judgement and then Nathan says "You are the man!" Very clever. He has got David to pronounce judgement on himself. Parables can be useful in that they get us off guard.

In what we read today we see Jesus pointing out the shortcomings of the Scribes and Pharisees, who seem to him, to be in it only for the respect and glory they can get. They do things, they wear ostentatious trappings of piety, and they talk about the holiness of the Law, hedging it round with other rules and regulations so that no one may even inadvertently transgress its commands. They tell others these rules but they do not manage - do not even attempt - to keep them themselves. They are like the salesman who tells the would-be hiker all the things he needs to carry: large rucksack, tent, water-bottle, cooking stove and extra fuel in case, sleeping bag, spare socks, thermal underwear and so on. Oh yes, he knows all the drill, but when asked it turned out that the salesman never even goes for a gentle stroll himself.

Jesus is not telling a parable. But what is he doing? In just the same way as he does in some parables, he is setting us up. It seems that he is picking a fight with the Scribes and the Pharisees - and indeed, if any heard him, they would not appreciate what he was saying. But who is he talking to? Not to the Scribes but to his disciples and the crowds. And to them he warns about the dangers of making a show of righteousness, and of laying down laws for others which one cannot and does not keep oneself. And just when the crowds and the disciples must have been saying "Yes, that's right, they are real hypocrites," he turns on them. "But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher..." and so on. Jesus sets us up. He isn't really, or isn't only picking a fight with any stray Scribes and Pharisees who might hear him. He is warning us: Christians, the Church.

Jesus knows that it is human nature to like a bit of glory, a bit of limelight. We like ranks and titles and even badges of office. They are shorthand for telling us about other people or for reassuring us about ourselves. Recently I heard tell of a young minister in a West Highland parish. He worked hard for his flock for six days each week, and took one day off, as ministers are supposed to do. One day, on his day off, he was helping run an open-air bookstall in aid of some charity. It wasn't a

church project, and he was dressed like the other volunteers in jeans and a t-shirt. One of his elders came to browse the books and he greeted him by name and asked after his health and his family. The elder glared at him. “Who are you that you seem to know me?” The minister identified himself and the elder replied: “Man, get home and get your collar on; how can we know what kind of man you are otherwise?”

We like badges of office and titles and so on. It tells us where we are, who we are dealing with. If we are the one with the badge, it can get us respect. But that is not how the church is supposed to be. We re all students together, following one teacher - Christ. We are all brothers and sisters together with a Father who doesn't play favourites - God. Instead the greatest one among us will be our servant. No place for limelight, then. Only for humble service.

That could mean that the one who serves best will be the greatest. But if it means that, then we know that Jesus didn't intend to set up a competition in false humility. You know that Monty Python Sketch where there is row of men boasting about which of them was the poorer when they were young, each trying to be the most outrageous? There is always a danger that Christians, knowing that we are to be humble and serve, can be like that. When I was a student in Aberdeen in the '80s, I had a couple of Divinity Student friends who used to award people Pharisee points if they thought that their Bibles were ostentatiously well-used: if the pages were falling out or every second verse was underlined, they would award a point or two. There are all sorts of subtle ways that we can vie to be the most humble, the most Christian of Christians, and, of course, all of them are self-defeating.

I don't think Jesus meant that the one who serves best will be the greatest. I think he meant that the one you look down on, the one who you give all the unpleasant jobs to as their natural lot in life, that one will be seen by God as the greatest. And so false humility and serving from wrong motivations is ruled out.

What Jesus has to say about the Scribes and Pharisees and to his followers is not vastly different from what is going on in the story in Joshua. It begins with God saying to Joshua, “Today I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel so that they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses.” This is not a story about Joshua setting himself up as leader, seeing a gap in the market now that Moses is dead and putting himself forward to fill it. God has already called Joshua to be the next leader, and now God is going to prove it. Joshua doesn't do anything himself to get the people's attention. God tells him what to say and do, and because he is humbly obedient, God can work wonders. Joshua wants only to serve, to serve God and the people, and so God is exalted. Joshua makes sure that the people know that what is going to happen is due solely to the power of God at work in their midst. Joshua wants the people to honour and worship God.

And so, you see, Joshua is the greatest, because he is the servant. He is the servant of God and the servant of the people. He is an illustration of how we are to be.

By what he is able to do through Joshua's obedience, God is exalted. The river waters are stopped in full flood, and everyone recognises that this is the work of God. The spotlight, you might say, shines fair and square on God. But Joshua, who is God's servant, is close beside God, and so he too is illumined at the edge of God's glory. He is close beside God, because that is where the good servant will be: close beside the master, ready to hear and obey. And if we want to have a rank in the Christian world, then there, in the servant's place, at the edge of God's glory is the only place to find it.

So when Jesus laid out his vision for his followers, he had no place for rank, no place for show. He had no room for those who would talk a good talk but not do what they said; no room for people whose words would burden others while they offered neither help nor companionship in the struggle. He had no place for those who wanted to put themselves centre-stage, in the full glare of the spotlights.

Jesus could say these things. Think about it. He denounced the show, the self-promotion, and the burden-loading when he was on the way to the cross. He was about to be stripped of all honour and dignity and to carry the greatest load that there is to bear - the load of our sin - so that his people would never again be weighed down by it. If anyone could denounce hypocrisy and show, then surely it was Jesus, who stood, as always at God's right hand, waiting to obey, no matter what, seeking only that God be glorified. He stood there taking no thought to himself, but only to his Father's will and to our salvation. He was not seeking honour and glory, but as is the case with every servant of God, we find that he was caught in the edge of the spotlight shone on God, illuminated at the edge of God's glory. And so it is that we honour and worship him, even as we seek to put ourselves aside and emulate his service.