

²Sermons at All Saints Anglican Church of Luxembourg

Preached by Rev Alison Heal on Sunday 1st September 2024

Bible text: Mark 7 : 1-8, 14-15, 21-23 NT p40

Epistle : James 1: 17-end NT p226

Theme: 'You hypocrites!' (Who, me?)

Do you know that feeling when you've heard a word lots of times and you've finally worked out what it means? I think it especially happens when you're still learning, either a child learning their home language, or someone of any age learning an additional language. So, you've heard a word frequently repeated and it makes some kind of sense in context so you don't question it, but finally, there's a 'click' moment and you actually understand what it means?

So I remember the moment when I finally had a 'click' about what the word 'hypocrite' means. I think I was about 12. Jesus is constantly accusing people of being hypocrites, and I grew up in a church-going family, so it was a word I'd heard many times and I understood that being a hypocrite is a bad thing. You heard it last week in the reading from Luke's gospel – Jesus was telling the people who could read the signs of the weather that they were hypocrites if they couldn't also read the signs of the times proclaiming God's kingdom. And we heard it again today, when Mark tells us how Jesus recalled the Old Testament prophet Isaiah's words: 'These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me'.

PAUSE

I think the reading Felix brought to us today may have been the reading I heard aged 12, when the meaning of 'hypocrite' 'clicked' for me, because "They honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me' is a pretty good definition of hypocrisy. The preacher that Sunday morning explained that a hypocrite is someone who says one thing, but does another. Someone who has all the right ideas but whose life doesn't show those ideas in action. Someone who 'talks the talk' but doesn't 'walk the walk'. So I heard this sermon and it must have stuck with me, because that Sunday evening I was sitting in the bath, mulling over the words, and it hit me hard: if that's what hypocrite means, I am a hypocrite!

My mother came into the bathroom a few minutes later to find me crying my eyes out in cooling bathwater – if you're a parent, you know how weird parenting can get. My mum asked me with great concern what on earth was the matter, and I remember sobbing:

'I've just found out what a hypocrite is, and I AM ONE!'

Pause

Parenting can be so hard.

Pause

My mum had to think up something right there and then to deal with her bawling tweenager. Thinking, no doubt, of Jesus' words and how the preachers made them sound very condemnatory, she replied kindly, 'Oh Alison, I'm sure you're not!'

I was comforted but not convinced.

And I can't fault my mother at all, but I don't think she told me the truth. With all the benefit of hindsight and not having to make up a spur-of-the moment response, I think a better answer would have been:

‘Yes Alison, that’s a good understanding, I expect you are sometimes a hypocrite, we all are sometimes, and the question is what are we going to do about it?’

So much easier to think up that answer when you’re not confronted with your sobbing child...

PAUSE

And so here is Jesus, challenging the hypocrites, who this time are the religious and political traditionalists. In our reading from Mark, they’ve really earned Jesus’ anger (and he does sound angry), by complaining that the disciples aren’t doing the ritual washing of their hands before they eat. You probably know this doesn’t mean they were eating with unhygienically dirty hands – it means they weren’t following the rules for a priest to wash their hands in the temple. The rabbi-teachers extended that idea about priestly hand washing, to apply to everyday people eating their everyday meals. In fact this is quite a nice idea – the idea that every person is involved in the work of God, so every person’s meal becomes a Godly event. At its best, the Jewish hand washing and prayers are a wonderful reminder that God is with all believers, at all times, through all events of their day, and all those events can be consecrated to God.

So it seems unlikely Jesus was complaining that people followed the hand washing tradition, but he was certainly annoyed when they tried to force it on his disciples too. It’s an interesting reminder that there are many ways to worship and serve God, in church and in daily life, and we have a lot of freedom in how we do that, but we don’t have freedom to condemn another Christian whose tastes, personality, experience and traditions lead them into different forms of worship.

What Jesus was complaining about was this issue of talking the talk without walking the walk – people who allowed the traditions which *point* towards God, to become *idols* which actually *stop* them from coming to God.

Jesus could say this about the scribes and the pharisees. But it’s an accusation we shouldn’t be too keen to throw at other people – we just have to let Jesus, through the Holy Spirit in us, show us where we might be hypocrites in our own lives.

PAUSE

Did you possibly have one of those ‘sitting in the bath, realising you’re a hypocrite’ moments earlier in the service, when we read the call to worship? (Without the bath, obviously.) *Show slide*

I was definitely having one of those moments as I typed out the words.

Shall we read it again?

Who may worship in your sanctuary, Lord? Who may enter your presence?

Those who do what is right, speaking the truth from sincere hearts.

Those who refuse to gossip or harm their neighbours or speak evil of their friends.

Such people will stand firm forever.

I am pretty certain that I’m not the only one to feel a bit squirmy when I read those words. How on earth could I claim that I always ‘do what is right’, always ‘speak the truth from a sincere heart’, that I consistently refuse to gossip, that I never harm my neighbour by design or by neglect, or that I never, ever speak badly about a friend?

And yet here we are in God’s sanctuary, entering into his presence.

Are we even fit to do that? Isn’t this a real example of hypocrisy?

My mother's generous reassurance: 'of course you're not a hypocrite' doesn't sit well with my own heart. As the reading from James put it, I am sometimes a hearer of the word, but not a doer. So when I look into what James calls God's perfect law of liberty, which reflects me like a mirror, I don't always see myself made in the image of God, I see the nasty mess I can make of life with my own tongue, my own human heart.

This is why more complicated answer, the one which says 'yes, good point, we can all be hypocrites, what are we going to do about it?' sounds more appropriate.

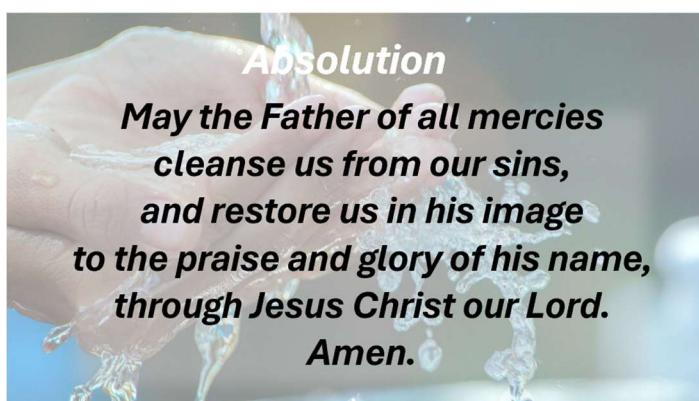
And that's why the very next thing we did this morning, in line with our Anglican order of service, was this:



When we come as God's people to worship together, we are confronted with his glory and his perfect way, and this moves us, every Sunday, into confession. It's a tradition, and it's a good tradition, that we confess our sins together early on when we get together in church, and it's a most wonderful grace that after we confess where we've fallen short, we are reminded of God's forgiveness.

Here are the words of the Absolution, which I said on behalf of all of us – see how it assures us that not only are we cleansed, but we're restored in God's image, and that's all done through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Shall we read it through together, now?



As Geoff said last week, when Jesus calls people hypocrites, that's not a condemnation. Instead, it's an invitation. It's an invitation to recognise the truth and run to Jesus with it. To throw myself upon God's grace through Jesus' life and death for me, and ask (once again) to be filled with his Holy Spirit, so that the trying harder and the self-discipline don't come from my human ego (which Jesus called the human heart) but from God in me.

This what Jesus offers when he speaks, elsewhere in the gospels, about rivers of living water flowing from those who believe. God comes to live in us and flows out of us in our daily lives. We're still us, but our lives are less ego-filled and more God-fuelled.

This is what our tradition for worship offers us every Sunday, this pattern of coming to God, recognising our hypocrisy in the face of his perfection, confessing our failings, receiving his forgiveness, being fed by his word and his body and blood, filled again by his Spirit, and then going out into the world, to live and work to his praise and glory.

It's a great pattern, but as we were considering last time I preached, we pray for our daily bread, not our weekly bread. Something of this pattern of checking in with God, confessing our sins, sharing our concerns, and being filled by his Holy Spirit, is needed to nourish us as we live at home and go to work and to school.

Oddly, it's something like that hand washing which the pharisees and scribes insisted on – finding a daily ritual, a daily pattern, which reminds us of the daily reality of God in our lives. A small action, a prayer linked to a particular part of the day, which brings us back from our 'doing life my way' and aligns us again with what Jesus is doing in the world around us.

I would love to hear from you, how you build that daily turning back to God, that thirsty re-filling with God's grace, in your life. The more ideas we get, about how our All Saints family places God at the centre of daily life, the more we can find patterns that work into our own lives. Don't be scared to tell me, or tell someone else, after the service! And don't be scared to ask for ideas, either. As Becky read, God is the generous Father who gives perfect gifts, including the gift of time with him. Let's pause for a moment in silent prayer, to ask God our Father how we can refresh ourselves in him, this coming week.