

## Setting the Scene

Have you ever been told off by someone who does what they tell you not to?

Don't speak with a mouth full  
Don't interrupt when someone else is speaking  
Only cross at the lights.

How does it feel?

- unfair
- confusing
- you don't believe them.

Jesus said the Pharisees were like that.

They taught people to put God first and they didn't.

They recited many times a day  
*"love the Lord your God  
with all your heart and soul  
and mind and strength"*

but they thought more about themselves than God.

They tried to keep a lot of religious rules not to please God but so God would be pleased with them.

They had the appearance of being good but inside - they were very selfish. They made rules that were very difficult for ordinary people to keep, and they didn't care.

God's Law and God's Love  
Skin Deep

4<sup>th</sup> before  
Advent

Matthew 23. 1 - 12  
1 Thess 2. 9 - 13

Jesus called them "hypocrites"  
it means "actor" - not real, just pretend.

So he told people to do what they teach  
as long as they taught the Law of Moses - Bible teaching  
but not to copy what they do.

One of their worst faults was -  
they thought they were important.

They wore clothes that made them look important.  
They liked to be called "Sir"

They asked Jesus lots of clever questions  
not to learn the answers  
but to catch Jesus out  
and show how clever they were.  
Smarter than Jesus. No Way!

So this week we see Jesus turning against them  
and saying hard things about them.  
They were pompous, and arrogant.  
Not at all godly.

Godly people are humble. Godly people try to serve others.  
If you are more clever than someone else  
don't use your knowledge or wisdom  
to show how stupid other people are -  
use what you know to help them.  
And you may never be thanked - but that doesn't matter.

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### 3 Holy Communion, 30<sup>th</sup> October 2011

And Jesus says something very strange, but very true

*The greatest among you  
will become your servant  
but anyone who is humble  
will be lifted up.*

Often God's way of seeing things  
turns all our values upside down.  
"Important" is bad - "Servant" is good.

Jesus came to be our servant  
not just to be an important person like the Pharisees.

He called the Pharisees "hypocrites" (= actors)  
and "snakes" (= doing the devil's work, not God's)

We must be careful we do not grow to be like them  
but rather grow to be like Jesus.

Not just "looking good"  
but being good.  
And sometimes, only you and God know about it.  
But that is a pretty good audience.

**More later**

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We looked at part of 1 Thessalonians last week.  
Just a reminder as to Paul's circumstances.

Paul and Silas had a bad time in Thessalonica.  
He preached fearlessly about Jesus to the Jews  
some believed, as did many *Gentiles*.  
But most of the Jews stirred up trouble.

Paul and Silas moved on, leaving Timothy,  
and they began to preach again in the next town - Berea.

The "noble Bereans" listened intently  
checked up on their message by searching the scriptures  
and then received them gladly.

But then some people from Thessalonica  
followed Paul to the new town  
and stirred up trouble again  
and Paul had to leave and move on to Athens.

So back in Thessalonica - to whom he writes this letter  
he had had some success, but others spoke badly of him  
accusing him of "impure motives", and greed,  
of seeking fame and honour, pleasing people not God.

So he writes this part of his letter  
to remind them of the truth.  
verse 8 - the end of last week's reading

*We loved you so much  
that we were delighted to share with you  
not only the gospel of God  
but our lives as well  
because you had become so dear to us.*

in verse 5 had had called on their memories  
on their testimonies.

He uses phrases such as  
"You know" and "God is our witness"  
because the truth should verify  
that the bad mouthing he had received  
was not fair - not accurate.

Now in verse 9, he reminds them  
of what they had given up  
to bring God's message to that place.  
verse 10, of the blameless life they lived  
while amongst them in Thessalonica.

Verse 11 - of their motives -

*as a father deals with his own children*

verse 12

*encouraging, comforting and urging you  
to live lives worthy of God  
who calls you into his kingdom and glory.*

And finally, verse 13

that their work was not in vain

*And we also thank God continually  
because when you received the word of God  
which you heard from us  
you accepted it not as the word of men  
but as it actually is, the word of God  
which is at work in you who believe.*

Paul is a faithful minister, not a madman  
bringing God's word to his people  
even when they did not like it.

Paul in a sense is typical of most who work in this field those who are paid and those who volunteer to bring the word of God to a community.

Some people welcome the ministry even though it can be challenging and accept that God is ministering to them through the words and the love of their preachers and pastors.

Others do not like to be told. Always in every community, in every church, there are those who want to be flattered (they may call it encouragement) and resent any challenge that might call for change.

It has always been so - it was true in this church to which Paul writes.

He sees the grumblers, and has bad things to say about them.

We were spared verse 16, when Paul announces  
*the wrath of God has come upon them at last.*

I don't know what that wrath was but it seems they don't get away with it for ever.

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But Paul is not just a chastiser.  
In chapter 3 verse 6 he reports  
that Timothy has returned with good news.

*He has told us*

*that you always have pleasant memories of us  
and that you long to see us,  
just as we also long to see you.*

The story is told, you will have heard it before,  
of the Vicar who was leaving a parish  
after some years of patient ministry.

He visited one elderly parishioner who assured him  
"We are sorry to see you go -  
the next vicar will not be as good as you."

Rather flattered, he asked why she thought so.

"I've seen six vicars pass through this parish,"  
she said, and every one was worse than the last.

People think more fondly of you after you leave.  
No doubt many of you have fond memories  
of clergy and readers, or other ministers  
that you have known.  
And that is a shame.

Not that we have fond memories of the past  
but that we cannot be as fond in the present.

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If you have been a parent  
there will have been times when parenting duties were difficult  
maybe having to exercise some discipline.

We all remember our own parents doing the same.

As a parent you know why you do it.

You do it out of love.

You do it in the best interests of your children.

You do it in the hope

that they will change their ways for the better.

As Paul says

*as a father deals with his own children  
encouraging, comforting and urging you  
to live lives worthy of God  
who calls you into his kingdom and glory.*

But you also know the reaction

and no doubt we have all expressed it as children

"You don't really love me!"

Paul is saying

those who spent the time we were with you

whingeing and complaining

have wasted an opportunity.

But those who took the opportunity

to receive ministry, to learn and to grow

found that God had ministered to them

and the church grew stronger, if not in numbers.

That was the church in Thessalonica.

In a sense, that was also Jesus' experience in Matthew 23.

He brought teaching and a challenge to the people of his day.

Some received his teaching gladly others - the Pharisees - found fault in him.

We all have a choice.

Churches go through good patches - sometimes a "golden age" and they go through more difficult patches.

Those difficult times can be times of discouragement. They can also be times of consolidation and strengthening.

If we see the church coming under attack. If the Enemy is having a go seeking to discourage us, and weaken us - be encouraged that he thinks there is something worth attacking.

Stand firm, take the opportunity to learn and go deeper.

Be faithful in your discipleship and your witness.

Be loyal to those among whom God has placed you.

Why did Timothy bring that good report?

because - 3 verse 5 - Paul says

*I was afraid that in some way  
the tempter might have tempted you  
and that our efforts might have been useless.*

There was a time - in the 50's and 60's  
when all the missionaries had to leave China  
because of the Communist regime.

When after thirty years or so, China was opened up  
missionaries returned  
fearing the church would have disappeared.

They found it had gone from strength to strength.

Tough times can be opportunities for growth.

So be encouraged. Stand firm.

Let those who have gone, go.

Together we will continue to seek God's blessing.

Together we will press on with his work.

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