

THE TOXIC ELEMENTS OF OUR CULTURE

Julia Denny-Dimitriou - 3rd November 2002

Micah 3 5-12, Psalm 43, 1 Thess 2 9-20, Matt 23 1-12

As we settle into Hilton we are discovering new things all the time – Rugby nb part of the local culture. I'm not a rugby fan, but our family gathered together last weekend to watch the Currie Cup - so we duly packed up our children and trekked off to my parents' home.

We had a family competition to guess the winning team and the score. I had to ask which teams were playing – I was told that it was the Lions and the Blue Bulls. I thought the Blue Bulls were from Cape Town! – I put my guess on the Blue Bulls from Cape Town and, as luck would have it, I was right, much to the disgust of the rugby fanatics in my family!

Continuing with the subject of culture –

I attended a valedictory lunch for the Matrics of 2002 – the guest speaker spoke about the toxic elements of our culture.

He said that there is a need for personal Vision and Values to counter these potentially noxious influences.

He issued a warning that, if learners do not have a set of personal values and develop a vision for their life, our culture would do it for them in terms of its own norms. As often mentioned from pulpits, culture values the pursuit and attainment of power, wealth, success and status. He advocated the way of Christ as a source of both vision and values.

He reminded the audience that Jesus was a revolutionary, and who could be said to have spoken out against the toxic elements of the culture of his day, particularly its Jewish religious culture.

The Gospel Passage set for today is an example of the counter-cultural nature of the message Christ brought. It is a fierce rebuke of the religious leadership of the day, highlighting the contrast between the values of the kingdom of heaven and the superficial approach to religion that they had developed.

The teachers of the law, or scribes, were the professional interpreters of scripture and the rabbinic tradition, which is commentary on Scripture handed down by the rabbis. The Pharisees was a religious 'party', so to speak, dedicated to rigorous observance of the Law. Most scribes belonged to the Pharisees.

Christ was not criticising them as individuals – they were generally upright and full of devotion - but he was criticising the system of religious observance, which they upheld. In insisting on adherence to a vast and growing set of regulations, they were

putting the system before its purpose. They were ignoring the inner motives and attitudes and focusing on the outward observance of the minutiae of the Law. They “lost the plot”.

In verse 5 ff Christ tackles the Jewish leaders for flaunting their status and authority.

The Seat of Moses was an actual seat in front of Synagogue where the authorised teacher sat, so it was also symbolic of the teaching authority of those responsible for interpreting the Law of Moses. Phylacteries are small cases containing verses of scripture that men tied to their arm and foreheads when they prayed and tassels refer to the fringes on prayer shawls. Phylacteries are still used by Orthodox Jewish men when they pray - as at the Wailing Wall Jerusalem - and you can often see tassels of their prayer shawls hanging out over their trousers.

Jesus criticised Jewish leaders for being more concerned about creating a good impression and being admired for their piety than about the effect their teaching had on ordinary Jews.

Because of their position of privilege Scribes and Pharisees could organise their lives in accordance with their own teachings on the Law. For them, for example, keeping to the 31 rules about the Sabbath was possible. However, it was hugely burdensome to ordinary Jews in trades and other walks of life who could not order their lives so easily.

Jesus also harshly criticised the arrogance and self-importance of the Scribes and Pharisees, denouncing their liking of honorary titles like ‘rabbi’, which was a title of respect given to teachers by Jewish disciples. The word ‘rabbi’ came from the Hebrew word for ‘great’, so it meant literally ‘my great one’.

In contrast v 8-12 Jesus proclaims humility to be the attitude that should be practised by those who seek the kingdom of heaven.

Disciples of the Way should be happy to take the lowest place and serve others rather than being caught up with pursuing position and power. This attitude was illustrated by Christ’s humble entry into Jerusalem recorded in Chapter 21, which was in stark contrast to the Jewish leaders’ pretentious behaviour.

So Christ was condemning what could be described as the toxic elements of the religious culture of his day – the Jewish leaders’ behaviour and their misuse of the Law. The essence of this criticism, which is still relevant for us today, is that religion is not about ritual or display but about relationship.

I want to suggest that, in a similar way, there may be elements of our religious culture that are noxious. Something that is intrinsically good can become poisonous if misused as the Law was by the Scribes and the Pharisees.

As Anglicans, we are blessed with a rich and varied tradition of public and personal worship and spirituality. At times of crisis or doubt, many people have found the traditions and practices of Anglicanism to be figurative and sometimes literal lifesavers. Things like - the offices of morning and evening prayer – the cycle of

daily readings in the lectionary – the sacraments of confession and absolution and the anointing of the sick. The ritual and symbolism of the Eucharist. These traditions of the church have held them and given them something to hold onto when they needed it desperately.

However, I want to suggest that there are also potential dangers inherent in the structures and traditions that we value and that are so important to “being an Anglican”.

The danger lies in the difference between form and content; structure and substance. It lies in our valuing religion above faith because it is possible to have “religion” without faith. It is possible not only to be a member of the large and long-standing group, the AWB, - Anglicans without Bibles but also of the AWG – Anglicans without God.

As I have already noted, this is because religion is not about ritual but about relationship, which is what Christ was saying to the religious leadership of his day, as Matthew records. We need to have the content that gives meaning to form, the substance that is the purpose of the structures.

Otherwise, we run the risk of being like the people in the story about a small town community, which was all-agog to hear from one of its young men who had been on an expedition to the jungle. “What it was like?” they asked him. “It was like this”, he started and then paused. “Let me put it to you this way” he started again and again he paused. “Well, it was.....” he sighed, and gave up.

“I cannot describe it to you, it’s beyond words. You have to go there to see for yourself so let me draw a MAP”.

The people were pleased with the map, and framed it to keep it safe. They put it in the Town Hall to come and admire it. They began to gather to discuss and analyse it. Eventually they began to worship it, and they built a whole culture around the MAP, but not **one** of townspeople ever used it for what it was intended – to help them find the way to the jungle to see it for themselves.

That is the purpose of religion. It helps us not to find God, but to allow ourselves to be found by God. The substance of religion is an encounter with God. The content of Anglicanism is an experience of the Divine Other.

Herein lies a central truth of the way of Christ, which is anathema to our culture. Our culture worships the mythical self-made man or woman. It prizes self-reliance and independence.

To preach self-abandonment, surrender and dependence on God is to fly in the face of one of the most toxic prevailing norms, just as Christ did.

As self-absorbed sinners, we often find it hard, and our society makes it even harder, to concede to the truth that in relationship with God it is God who initiates and we who respond, as befits the relationship between creatures and their creator.

We sometimes seem to hold ourselves responsible for our experience of God, as though we have to manufacture this encounter. Just about everything else can be manufactured by us or by someone who holds the means of production, so why not religious experience?

We need to be on our guard against the danger of mistaking structure for substance, so that the rituals and traditions of the church do not become an end in themselves, rather than a means to an end. Through valuing our traditions and practices above their intended purpose, we run the risk of becoming like the Scribes and Pharisees who seriously lost the plot. They got caught up with rules and regulations and creating the right religious image.

We need to be aware of the danger of becoming like the people of the map who got stuck where they were, content with merely worshipping the map. They never went on that journey to experience the jungle for themselves. We too might be in danger of getting stuck and never experiencing a relationship with God, never allowing God to find us.

So as we move towards the Advent time of preparation for Christmas, I would like to suggest we do some personal stocktaking. We should ask ourselves if we have perhaps begun to lose the plot a little and could do with some assistance in finding it again. We should ask ourselves whether we are on the faith journey of experiencing God or have perhaps become stuck along the way somewhere or perhaps in still admiring and discussing the map.

This community is blessed with a wealth of resources to help us walk the Way of Christ - people to consult, books, videos, bible study groups, prayer groups and so on. If you would like assistance do approach one of the leaders who will be able to help or point you in the right direction.

However, if it is advice on rugby you are looking for I don't suggest you ask me! Since moving to Hilton I have also discovered that the Sharks are not, as I thought, the KZN waterpolo team!

I should like to end with a time of quiet for reflection and to hear what God may be saying to each of us. Nic will then lead us in prayer around the themes of the readings and sermon before the layminister continues.