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Introduction

In our very first reflection on this year's lectionary readings at Advent 1, we noted the shift in tone which occurs across the 5 great discourses in Matthew's gospel and the corresponding narrowing of its emotional keys and narrative dynamic. Today's passage – directed at the crowds and the disciples – comes just before the final discourse (which begins at 24:1) and foreshadows the strong language with which Jesus will address the scribes and pharisees themselves. At one level then we can see Jesus' scathing critique as reflecting Matthew's own frustration and anger that, in the aftermath of the destruction of the temple, Judaism had not reformed in a way shaped by the understanding of the Kingdom of God articulated by Jesus, and thus as being very historically and culturally specific. At another, we can trace various underlying dynamics which can still speak to us today as we reflect on the dynamics of conflict and how we respond to it.

Anchor Question

Try and recall (or imagine) a situation in which, in order to become part of a group, or achieve resolution of a situation, assorted highly specific or seemingly arbitrary conditions had to be met. If you were the person or part of the group who had to meet the conditions, how did that feel? If you were the person or part of the group setting the conditions, what were the reasons for doing this? Do you consider them to have been good ones? What was the outcome of the situation?

Text

Matthew 23:1–12

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples,

“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat;

therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.

They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.

They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long.

They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues,

and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi.

But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students.

And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven.

Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah.

The greatest among you will be your servant.

All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Comment

In Chapter 8 of his book Nehemiah describes how the scribe Ezra, in what amounts to a National dedication to the Law, marks the return from Exile and rebuilding of Jerusalem by reading ‘the Book of the law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel from early morning until midday’ and of how ‘all the people were attentive to the book of the law.’ (8:1–3) The account is just one indication of the central place that the Law – the Word of God given directly to them – held in Jewish self-identity. Unsurprisingly then its study was a significant profession and ‘the scribes’ were those to whom this task was entrusted.

Unfortunately their determination to pin down and precisely delineate what was implicit had, over the centuries, led to the situation in which a myriad rules and regulations had become attached to religious and other observance. Thus for example the Mishnah sets out some very detailed definitions of what constitutes work on the Sabbath e.g. ‘Whoever gathers wood, if to improve [the] ground, any quantity, [however small]; if to burn, *sufficient to boil a light egg*. Whoever gathers herbs, if to improve the ground, any quantity, [however small]; if for [feeding] a beast, *sufficient for a kid’s mouthful*.’ Whilst the Scribal Law was originally an oral tradition it was eventually summarised and codified into the 63 tractates of the Mishnah, and the various Talmuds – extensive commentaries to explain the Mishnah – followed. To keep this plethora of rules required intense dedication and unlimited time and it was to this pursuit that the Pharisees (the Aramaic means ‘separated’) gave themselves.

Although the original intention had been to clarify and illuminate, the net effect was that the great, life enhancing principles set out in the Law eventually became buried under a mass of rules and regulations. In this passage Jesus acknowledges that the scribes do indeed stand in the great tradition of transmission of the Law from Moses to Joshua to the elders and prophets, and thus that in as far as anything they taught still transmitted its core elements, it should be listened to. However he also raises two very specific charges against them and it is these that can be illuminating for us in our reflections on the different dynamics which play a part in situations of conflict and our approach to it.

Firstly, rather than making religion a life-enhancing thing which liberates and enlarges those who practice it, the scribal rules have made it a terrible burden which restricts and diminishes life. Secondly things which were intended to point towards the touchstones against which they were to measure their attitudes and actions have become subverted: the phylacteries and fringes originally meant to remind their wearers of the Law and Commandments now function instead as exterior and ostentatious signifiers of piety and an invitation to others to treat them with deference and respect. Whilst the descriptions here are very historically and culturally specific, the underlying processes are ones which can play out in any age and which might well be part of the dynamics of a conflict situation. In the case of the scribes, the imposition of a whole raft of conditions and qualifications, whilst the original intent might have been to aid understanding and support appropriate action, had not only obscured the underlying principles governing right relationships and behaviour but also made it impossible for progress to be made. In a similar way, we might find our selves imposing (or having imposed upon us) conditions which, rather than improving a situation, instead constitute additional

hurdles to be overcome before a solution or resolution can be reached. In the case of the Pharisees, something which was designed to function as a grounding device, rooting them in a particular communal narrative and behavioural code, had instead become a means of personal display, gratification and advancement. It may be that we too have drifted into a situation where we are subverting the use of things which are meant to ground and guide us and instead using them as a means of setting ourselves apart from others or escaping engagement with them.

Response

Think of a situation of disagreement or conflict – either personal or relating to a church or group with which you are involved – in which progress or resolution depends on certain conditions being met. Spend some time reflecting on the purpose of those conditions and whether they are likely to be a help or a hinderance to making progress.

Are there any conditions which you would find it particularly hard to meet/let go of and if so why?

Is there a more imaginative way in which you could approach this situation which didn't depend on hoops and hurdles to be negotiated?

Are there any specific actions you could take to change the dynamics of the situation?

Prayer

Jesus,

Whenever we are tempted to set conditions on others before we will hear them or move towards them, help us to be mindful that such conditions, however well intentioned, can hinder and constrain rather than hastening resolution and healing.

And help us to think again – and with more imagination.

Amen.
