

*May I speak in the name of God,
beyond us, beside us, and within us*

In first-century Palestine, Judaism was not homogenous. Instead we see a number of different Jewish groups or factions, with varying beliefs and opinions – a bit like the Church of England...

So we have the Pharisees, who are strict observers of the Jewish religious Laws, and for them the Law includes both scripture itself and the elaborate ever-developing scribal tradition of interpretive commentary upon scripture which the Pharisees themselves are producing.

And we have the Sadducees who are a sort of wealthy group of religious aristocrats who are in some ways more conservative than the Pharisees because they rejected most of the Old Testament and the scribal traditions of legal commentary, and only accepted the first five books of the Hebrew Bible as divinely inspired.

And we have the Zealots, who are a sort of religious terrorist organisation, who want to restore the Kingdom of God by aggressive means.

And there are other more obscure groups in first-century Judaism but they are the three main ones, and Jesus had difficult relationships with all of them.

From very early on in the gospels, the Pharisees start popping up with objections to Jesus's apparent divergence from law and tradition. The Sadducees also voice some occasional intellectual arguments to Jesus's teaching at various points. The Zealots are less conspicuous in the gospels, but it is generally understood that Judas Iscariot is a Zealot, and that perhaps his betrayal of Jesus could be a politically-motivated attempt to try and force Jesus into an aggressive show of power, in which case the Zealots have a very significant role indeed in the gospel.

But in Christian history, it's generally the Pharisees that have received the most negative publicity. Today, if we say that someone is pharisaic then we mean that they are a self-righteous holier-than-thou hypocrite. They are someone who is putting on a show of external observance but they have no sincerity of heart, they have no inner devotion.

Now that's probably a bit unfair on the poor Pharisees. It's likely that many of them were sincere believers that obedience to the law was the path to righteousness but, reading the gospels today, it's quite easy for us to see the Pharisees as fastidious hypocrites, because the concerns they raise about Jesus's teaching and behaviour don't resonant very much with our modern sensibilities.

In Mark's gospel, the Pharisees first appear in Chapter 2 by objecting to Jesus eating with tax-collectors and sinners; and then for not fasting; and then for plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath. And then, by the time Jesus heals the man with the withered arm on the Sabbath, the Pharisees are already beginning to plot how to destroy him. So by the end of Chapter 2, the Pharisees are already cast as evil adversaries who the Christian reader will probably struggle to have much sympathy for or identification with. But this discussion in today's gospel between Jesus and the Pharisees, and the careful distinction that Jesus is making between the commandments of God and the human tradition is still very significant and relevant to us today.

Each of the gospel writers presents Jesus's relationship to the Jewish law slightly differently. At one end we have Matthew, who presents Jesus as the authoritative interpreter of the Jewish law – or 'the perfect law', as the Letter of James said in our first reading today. And at the other end we have the Gospel of Luke and Epistles of Paul that present Jesus as something more radical, new and distinct from the Jewish law. And somewhere in between, we have the Gospel of Mark that walks a middle way. In today's reading, we hear Jesus affirming what he calls 'the commandments of God' and 'the word of God' – and as an example he quotes the Book of Exodus and the commandment to honour your father and mother – but he rejects the 'human tradition' or 'human precepts' that the Pharisees have constructed around the Law, which in this instance are all dietary and handwashing regulations.

And Jesus wants to get rid of all this unnecessary secondary legislation and return to the true purpose, the deeper magic of God's word.

Now at this moment in time, many of us may be able to relate to feeling somewhat wearied by stringent hand-washing regulations; and asking what we believe is truly essential to Christian faith, as opposed to what we think is just personal taste and ingrained custom and habit, is always an interesting question to pose ourselves.

In one of his books on Christian spirituality, Ronald Rolhesier tells a story about a young nun attending a religious conference to discuss world poverty. She belonged to a particularly abstemious order of nuns, who fasted regularly, slept on straw mattresses and avoided luxuries of all kinds.

It was a week-long conference and by day 5, the participants were getting tired and the organisers announced they would have a free afternoon. They had arranged for a bus to take the participants into the city nearby and they would all eat dinner together in a nice restaurant. And this all took place.

And at the end of the conference there was a Eucharist, and there was a moment before the final blessing when there was an open microphone and an invitation was issued to anyone who had experienced some deep grace during the conference to come forward and share it with the group. And towards the end of this sharing, the young nun approached the microphone.

She told the conference that she had hated the free afternoon. She had joined the group going on the bus into the city but she had kept thinking it was an awful waste of time and money, and a terrible insult to the poor. She had looked with distaste in the windows of expensive shops filled with luxuries. And when it came time to go to the restaurant, she saw all the silver cutlery and linen napkins, and was so nauseated by it all that she went back out to the bus and sat on her own while everyone else ate dinner.

And she had to sit there a long time. And many thoughts ran through her head. And, at one point, she found herself asking the question, 'What would Jesus be doing? Would he be sitting with her on the bus, or would he be in the restaurant eating and drinking and having a good time?' And she had the horrible realisation that Jesus would not be with her on the bus. Jesus would be in the restaurant with the people, delighting in their company, enjoying the good food and drink.

And instead of Jesus, sitting with her on the bus would be John the Baptist – wearing his itchy and uncomfortable camel hair's tunic, probably nibbling sulkily on a locust.

And the young nun realised that her heart had become cold and hard. That she was living a good Christian life – praying and fasting, and doing works of charity with a strong sense of social justice. And yet she had become like the older brother of the prodigal son, the one who's resentful of his father's joyous welcome at the return of his younger brother. That she was doing all

the right things but she had no celebration in her heart. And this difficult realisation was the deep grace-experience she wanted to share with the conference.

Now I love that story because – I'm not afraid to admit – I find it fairly easy to identify with the serious young nun sitting disapprovingly on the bus. I've definitely been the nun-on-the-bus at some points in my life. Just as in the parable of the Prodigal Son, I can often find myself drawn towards the character of the older brother, feeling unappreciated and chewing on a nice bit of resentment. The wonderful thing about the nun's story is that she articulates her grace experience, whereas in the parable of the prodigal son, the story ends before the elder brother has received the transformative grace which we have to pray is coming.

So perhaps we might each like to ponder what are the things that provoke us to self-righteous disapproval and condemnation. I suspect that in a community like St James's it won't so often be to do with the meticulous observance of traditional religious laws. The legalistic concerns of the Pharisees are probably not going to resonant with us very much. But the world of modern liberal politics also has an enormous capacity for introducing inflexible regulations and requirements, and then for ruthlessly shaming people who are deemed to violate them. What Carla Bergman and Nick Montgomery (two contemporary American anarchist writers) call 'rigid radicalism'. Wanting to challenge injustice can easily tip over into an over-zealous 'call out culture'. The vigilant monitoring of errors and

complicities in others and in ourselves. Being so preoccupied with the inadequacy of people and things that we end up crushing all experimentation, curiosity and joy.

It's a colossal challenge for us to disagree with people on important matters, without ceasing to love them. And there are a lot of tendencies in our modern culture and media that are pushing us towards an ever-increasing polarisation of alternative viewpoints, that seek to trigger us into an impetuous state of being outraged and offended – because we're quite malleable when we're in that state, we lose our sense of perspective and proportion, and we tend to consume more things in an effort to soothe ourselves. So, in an advanced consumer culture, there's quite a lot of producers and suppliers who have a vested interest in keeping us alarmed, anxious, outraged and offended as much as possible. And we need to be alert to this, and resist it, if we want to broaden our window of tolerance and expand our freedom to love.

Now this is all well and good but how do we actually do this, you may ask. How do we negotiate our way through the mess of flotsam and jetsam to the true spiritual heart of things? And perhaps you won't be surprised if I say prayer.

And I want to finish today by making a plug for Petra's 5-week course in Deep Abiding Prayer that starts next month. Deep Abiding Prayer is a contemplative prayer method, about getting in touch with the heart centre as a focus of spiritual energy, truth and insight. If you were on our Camino Companions online pilgrimage then you had a little taste of

this back in June but we didn't really have enough time for Petra to lead us through it fully, and several of you wanted more, so next month Petra is offering a free 5 week online course to properly introduce you to this technique. It's really not that complicated – but it does help to have someone steer you through it until it becomes familiar.

So if you like the idea of discarding some of the unnecessary debris and connecting with what is true and essential and heartfelt, then there's a nice practical tool that you could learn to use. And you can find a notice about that prayer course in the weekly newsletter, which is also on our website, and you can sign up through ChurchSuite (here: <https://sjp.churchsuite.com/events/bvfm-ux53>) – and I'm sure that Petra would be only too happy to answer any questions that you might have.

For we are all called to be God's ambassadors of reconciliation. First and foremost, we are to have hearts of love. It's only from a place of being 'rooted and grounded in love' that we can safely begin to learn the truth about ourselves. And if one of our tasks is to bring truth to someone else, we can only do that when they know they're fully loved and accepted.

As Lucy said recently, whenever truth is spoken, mercy is needed. Jesus is both judge and saviour, and God's judgment through Christ is a righteous reconciliation of good and evil that we struggle to comprehend because nothing in our human experience really corresponds to it.

Our best antidote to self-righteousness is to practice gratitude – the glad acknowledgement that everything is gift, everything is grace. To say a thanksgiving over life, and over the whole of our lives, in all their imperfection and their brokenness, in all of our pain and frustration, as well as our joy, is the surest way of turning life into a blessing and of finding God in all things – and this is exactly what we do as we celebrate the Eucharist together again this fine Sunday morning.

Amen