

11th Sunday after Trinity

Psalm: 33

First Lesson: Job 5:8-18

⁸ I would seek unto God, and unto God would I commit my cause:

⁹ Which doeth great things and unsearchable; marvellous things without number:

¹⁰ Who giveth rain upon the earth, and sendeth waters upon the fields:

¹¹ To set up on high those that be low; that those which mourn may be exalted to safety.

¹² He disappointeth the devices of the crafty, so that their hands cannot perform their enterprise.

¹³ He taketh the wise in their own craftiness: and the counsel of the froward is carried headlong.

¹⁴ They meet with darkness in the daytime, and grope in the noonday as in the night.

¹⁵ But he saveth the poor from the sword, from their mouth, and from the hand of the mighty.

¹⁶ So the poor hath hope, and iniquity stoppeth her mouth.

¹⁷ Behold, happy is the man whom God correcteth: therefore, despise not thou the chastening of the Almighty:

¹⁸ For he maketh sore, and bindeth up: he woundeth, and his hands make whole.

Second Lesson Matthew 23:13-31

¹³ But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in.

¹⁴ Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore, ye shall receive the greater damnation.

¹⁵ Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves.

¹⁶ Woe unto you, ye blind guides, which say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor!

¹⁷ Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold?

¹⁸ And, Whosoever shall swear by the altar, it is nothing; but whosoever sweareth by the gift that is upon it, he is guilty.

¹⁹ Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift?

²⁰ Whoso therefore shall swear by the altar, sweareth by it, and by all things thereon.

²¹ And whoso shall swear by the temple, sweareth by it, and by him that dwelleth therein.

²² And he that shall swear by heaven, sweareth by the throne of God, and by him that sitteth thereon.

²³ Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.

²⁴ Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel.

²⁵ Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess.

²⁶ Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also.

²⁷ Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness.

²⁸ Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.

²⁹ Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous,

³⁰ And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.

³¹ Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets.

Introduction

During my time up here in the pulpit, I have shared things with you about my walk with Christ. I have talked about growing up in Idaho and being active in the Episcopal church. I have shared experiences about being an acolyte and how my formation started at an early age. I have also shared with you my experiences from the last eleven years, spanning my initial search for a church, my desire to put God in my life again, discovering St. Andrew's and my journey to the diaconate. When I was preparing for this week and reading our reading from Matthew, where

Jesus calls out the hypocrisy seen in the actions of the scribes and Pharisees, I found myself thinking about the years that lay in between.

During that time, I was working in law enforcement and the stress and reality of that career was heavy on me. I saw humanity at its lowest and the Enemy was working hard to pull me away and add chaos to my life. For a variety of reasons, I started to see organized religion, and church, in an extremely negative light. I still believed in God, but I tended to want to keep my beliefs private and I had no desire to go to church. I think it was a combination of what was happening in the world, including the issues and behavior of representatives of the Catholic church, as well as television preachers and the hypocrisy they presented. It also had to do with some of the people I worked with. I remember one man who I had as field partner, he was constantly telling me how great his church was, how much he knew the Bible, and telling me how I should be doing the same. What I also noticed was how negatively and without compassion he treated people when we were in the field such as the homeless or those ravaged by addiction or mental illness. He constantly gossiped about other co-workers and saw himself as superior to most other people. He once told me after coming back from vacation how hard it was to come back to this environment and how it felt futile to “cast my pearls among the swine.” I often would disagree with his approach and challenge his “Christian view,” but he was very dismissive and pious in his responses. I ended up staying away from him for the most part and decided that if this was the way of living that he had gleaned from church, I did not want any part of it.

I understand now that I was just reacting to my environment and in my mind, putting everyone in the same basket. The world was still a good place, and there were good people, I just did not allow myself to see them. I was surrounded by suffering, negativity and government

regulations. There were times when an incident would show me the power of God, or times when I saw things that reminded me of what Christ represented to all of us. Slowly, I felt myself changing. I am blessed that the Holy Spirit gave me a desire to follow God again and search for understanding and perspective in my life.

As I interacted with our scripture readings for today, I am reminded that these issues have been around for a long time. In our reading from Matthew, Jesus points out a significant problem with the religious leaders of His day. These leaders were committed to their strict interpretations of the law but failed to understand the heart of the law, which is love, compassion, and faithfulness. They were more concerned with their status and authority than with really knowing God and helping others come into a relationship with Him. It is worth all of us to look at this passage in greater detail, the passage often called the “The Seven Woes to the Scribes and Pharisees.” We may call ourselves religious, but we may not be living in the right manner.

Body

In our reading today Jesus is in Jerusalem, near the end of his public ministry, confronting the religious authorities directly. We see the sharpness and discomfort of Jesus' words in this passage. These "woes" are not a gentle rebuke, but a fierce condemnation. Several times we hear Jesus say, “*But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!*” It is important to understand that Jesus is not condemning their Jewish faith, but their hypocrisy and their misuse of that faith. All of us today can also fall into this trap, so let us look at some of these issues that Jesus pointed out.

(Matthew 23:13) Jesus begins his rebuke. Shutting out the Kingdom (v. 13)

In verse 13 Jesus tells them, “*For ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in.*” Jesus is telling them

that as religious leaders they shut the kingdom of heaven off for people through their actions and behavior. They make it harder, not easier, for people to encounter God's grace and truth, which is contrary to what Jesus's message was. How many churches do this today with practices that alienate people or focus on issues and things not related to the Gospel message? As Anglicans is our emphasis on acceptance and honest welcome, open Communion, and the accessibility of God's grace to all? So many times, I have been to places of worship that focused on growth, individual accolades and not on the message of the Gospel.

(Matthew 23:13-26: Jesus' Indictment of appearance and ego over substance.)

In verse 15, Jesus continues his stern rebuke on the Pharisees, *“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves.”* Jesus is referencing the earnest efforts made to convert someone to Christianity, but this zeal for conversion often is shallow and lacks true inner transformation. In one of my classes at Liberty, I remember hearing a young man gloat and brag about how many people he had brought to Christ, instead of being humble and also giving them the means to grow spiritually. In verse 23, Jesus again confronts the focus on material things, in this case spices, over more important considerations. *“For ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.”* As Anglicans are we meticulous about the minor rules or traditions, while neglecting the weightier matters of genuine Christian living: justice for the marginalized, showing mercy, honoring God in all we do and being truly faithful to His commandments? As I have mentioned before, our liturgical practices are important, but they are means to an end. They help us build a relationship with God

that transforms us for service in the world and for what lies ahead. We must not mistake the beautiful form for the living faith it is meant to nourish.

(Matthew 23:25-26: Jesus' focus on not neglecting the inside when cleaning out the outside.)

In verses 25 and 26, Jesus continues his relentless focus on the behavior of the Pharisees. *“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also.”* Do we prioritize appearing as a good person or overly religious to others while our inner lives are plagued by unaddressed sin, selfish motives, or unexamined prejudices? Are we being truthful to ourselves and not focusing on our outward appearances? The call to daily repentance, self-examination, and having a heart open to the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit is key to transforming our hearts. The rhythm of confession and absolution in our liturgy speaks to this continuous inner transformation.

(Matthew 23:27-31: Jesus' focus on the inner problems of self-deception and hypocrisy.)

Jesus does not let up on his rebuke, and in verses 27-31 he warns of self-deception and hypocrisy.

“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness.”

“Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchers of the righteous, And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets.”

Jesus talks of “whitewashed sepulchres or tombs” as a metaphor for those who are visually appealing on the outside, pleasant looking to the eye, but inside are full of death and decay. The hearts of the Pharisees who honor past prophets while persecuting present ones, demonstrated a blindness to God's ongoing work and a denial of their own heritage of rejecting truth. Our rich history of saints and martyrs is a blessing, but it must call us to courage and prophetic witness today, at this point in time, not just comfort us with triumphs of the past. We are called to embody the faith of those who came before us, even when it is uncomfortable or not popular with the masses.

Action

Our reading from Matthew provides us with vital lessons about our faith journey. One of the more significant teachings revolves around the idea of authenticity. Jesus calls out the hypocrisy seen in the actions of the scribes and Pharisees, reminding us of the importance of living genuinely. It is easy to say we follow Christ and how often we attend church, but we must ask ourselves whether our actions and behaviors align with our words.

Additionally, we are challenged to reflect on how we engage with others in their spiritual journeys. Are we opening doors to the kingdom of heaven or are we finding ways to close them? Keeping our hearts and minds open to those who seek God is essential. We need to be a source of encouragement to others, inviting them to explore their faith rather than shutting them down

because of our preconceived notions or interpretations. This passage presents the message of humility. The Pharisees were focused on their image and status, laying heavy burdens on others while neglecting their own deeply flawed hearts. We can learn to be humble in our approaches to faith and relationships, recognizing that we all fall short of the glory of God and need God's grace in our lives.

As we think about what Jesus was saying, the focus is to let these lessons penetrate our own hearts. Where are we guilty of spiritual complacency, hypocrisy, or prioritizing appearance over substance? It is not about being perfect, but about being authentic. It is about striving for a heart aligned with God's mercy and justice. It is about letting God clean the inside of us, our hearts, our souls and our minds to honor and love God. This is the continuous journey of sanctification. Through prayer, sacrament, our church community, and service, we are invited to grow into the likeness of Christ, being not just hearers of the word, but doers also, building our lives on the solid rock of Christ's teachings.

Conclusion

Today's Gospel reading challenges us, not just the Pharisees of old, to look beyond outward piety and religious performance to the state of our hearts, reminding us that true discipleship is characterized by integrity, genuine compassion, and a sincere commitment to God's transformative love, rather than mere outward appearances. Fr. Chris talked last week about the price of discipleship and the weight of the cross we carry. Jesus' woes that he describes in our reading today serve as a timeless warning against a religion of outward pretense. He calls us to radical honesty about ourselves and a deep commitment to the inner transformation that produces genuine mercy, justice, and faithfulness. When I was younger, all I saw was the hypocrisy and selfishness of religion, and I knew there had to be something more authentic.

When I closed my eyes to the noise of the outside world and focused on what God was doing in my life, things became a lot clearer. I continue to pray daily for humility, forgiveness of my sins and for a genuine effort to be authentic in my walk with Christ, in both how I worship God and how I treat my neighbors. May we all seek to honor God in this manner.

To the only wise God, be glory, majesty, dominion and power. Now and forever. Amen.