

“FOLLOWING THE KING – 46”
Matthew 16:1-12

It has to be said, doesn't it, that Jesus is not the most straightforward teacher. Of course, most of us here this morning will have heard his sayings and stories and aphorisms interpreted on many occasions and may even have taken the trouble to read other books about what he said in order to try and make sense of his many pronouncements. But try, once again, to imagine reading Matthew's story of Jesus' life for the first time without any prior knowledge of Jesus and his message – or, even more difficult, try to imagine being one of his disciples and standing with him as he spoke these odd words.

Because, once again this morning we come across one of Jesus' apparently random sayings – and once again his disciples, the little group of close friends with whom he is travelling around the area around Galilee at the start of his final journey towards Jerusalem, cannot work out what he's on about. In frustration, Jesus actually says to them, *“Do you still not understand?”* The answer's, “No – we don't”. And it's not initially very easy for us to understand what he's trying to say and why, either. It seems, though, that the Gospel writers are usually pretty straightforward in their writing and Matthew certainly sets things down as he finds them, so if we take what he writes here at face value, it gets a bit easier to understand.

Jesus and his disciples are making their way by boat across the lake after the second big picnic – Jesus has just fed four thousand people with a few loaves and pieces of fish. As they are sailing across the lake they realise that they've forgotten to get any bread for themselves and there's nothing to eat in the boat. Fair enough, they may well get a bit peckish before they reach the other side, but they're certainly not going to starve (as one commentator seems to think): after all, they've just had some bread and fish with all the others, presumably. Jesus, though, takes the discussion about having no bread as the cue for one of these seemingly random sayings – *“Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”*

Now, these disciples are a fairly simple bunch, by and large. They've been talking about bread: Jesus starts mentioning yeast, so they take it literally. After all, why take it any other way? (It's a bit like the dwarves in Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* stories. As miners, living and working in an environment where anything could collapse or explode at any moment, it's vital that there's no misunderstanding when it comes to communication, so they've never learned the beauty of metaphor or simile.) Maybe the Pharisees have a special rule about yeast – they seem to have had special rules about everything from getting animals out of ditches to how much parsley to tithe: it wouldn't be particularly surprising, then, if they should have some pronouncement about yeast. James Moffatt, in his translation writes, *“‘Leaven?’ they argued amongst themselves, ‘we have no bread at all.’”* And then Jesus starts berating them for

being stupid, ignorant, faithless, not understanding. It's all a bit confusing, isn't it? So what's it all about? What is Jesus trying to say?

Well, there's no doubt in anyone's mind, I don't think, that Jesus is talking figuratively here. He doesn't actually mean real yeast. Time and time again in the Bible – in both Old and New Testaments – yeast is used as a metaphor for corruption, for the insidious working of evil within a larger society or group. In fact, there's probably only one reference to yeast in the New Testament where it is taken to be something good at work, and, as we've seen, that's in *Matthew 13:33*. But the disciples are taking it all literally because at this moment they are preoccupied with the issue of real bread – they don't have enough for their lunch.

And that is exactly the problem Jesus is talking about. The disciples are preoccupied with the material, with bread for themselves. And they do not need to be anxious about that. *"Don't worry about that,"* says Jesus. *"That's exactly what the Pharisees are doing. Look! I've proved in these two picnics – not once but twice – that I can meet your material needs, haven't I? You still don't get it, do you?"* And there is a clue as to what this *"yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees"* is all about. They have become preoccupied with the external, the material, the easily seen. Jesus is talking about the heart, about inner transformation, about attitudes.

But who are these *"Pharisees and Sadducees"* whose *"yeast"* is so dangerous. Well, the Sadducees have only appeared in Matthew's story once so far – and that's in connection with John the Baptist's preaching back in chapter 3. They're a bunch of mainly high class Jews, who are trying to ensure that the Romans don't eliminate the Jewish people and their traditions, but they are actually more keen on their own personal survival than the upholding of tradition. They saw the way forward as collaboration with the Romans, trying to suck up to the occupiers and not to rock the boat too much. Although they kept to most of the main parts of the traditions and rituals of the Jews, they didn't, for example, believe in anything after this life, no resurrection or anything like that. In almost every way, they were opposed to the Pharisees – usually their political and religious enemies. But when it came to Jesus' announcements about the Kingdom of God and his own part in that as the promised kingly Messiah, they were very happy to team up with those same Pharisees against their common enemy.

Of course, we've encountered the Pharisees a fair bit now as we've worked our way through these first few chapters of Matthew's story of Jesus. They are the gatekeepers of the ritual and religion of the Jews, the ones who try to uphold every little bit of the Law of Moses – and all the hundreds of extra bits that have been added over the centuries. They have become so consumed with keeping the rules and regulations that they've forgotten why they're keeping them. And Jesus has clashed with them on almost

every occasion he's met them, mainly because they cannot see that the Kingdom of God, the vision of a renewed and restored creation, is not something that can be manufactured or can be coaxed into being by just doing the right things in the right order. Jesus has just got on and demonstrated what it's going to be like as he has healed and exorcised, taught and encouraged. But, as we saw in the previous section, the Pharisees want extra signs, proofs that will fit in with their own, carefully prescribed ideas of what it's all about.

Let's just remind ourselves for a moment of what it seems to be that that Pharisees want – at least, as Matthew portrays them. They are obsessed with image (they don't like the fact that Jesus mixes with the down and outs), with religious practices (fasting and hand-washing), with rules and regulations (tithing and ritual cleanliness), with dogma. Their first priority seems to be to criticise those who don't conform; they are actually on the lookout for anything that doesn't quite fit in with their own way of doing things, continually setting Jesus tests of orthodoxy – it seems that they've made up their minds and then closed them down. However, that leads them to say illogical things, such as that Jesus is in league with the devil, and it lays them open to the charge of hypocrisy. In the end, they just want to eliminate anyone who proves awkward to them and have already started to conspire about getting rid of Jesus.

That's really what is behind their demand in the first few verses of this chapter for “*a sign*”. At the end of the previous chapter, Jesus has seen the need of the people and fed them. He has acted out of compassion. The Pharisees now want him to act out of compulsion. They demand a sign, a miracle. As far as they are concerned, they're the ones in the driving seat and they see it as part of their duty to compel Jesus to act. And he is not prepared to do that. He doesn't demonstrate his power, doesn't offer glimpses of the Kingdom to order.

He tells them that they are pretty good at working out the weather from the signs – “*Red sky at night ...*” and all that stuff – but they can't work out what's right under their noses from the signs that they've already had. They've had ample opportunity already to see and hear what Jesus can do. And yet they still want something else. Jesus is not interested in performing for them, giving them a short-cut to faith in the Kingdom. I suspect that, even if Jesus had acceded to their demands and performed a miracle especially for them, they'd have wanted more, they'd have set him yet another test.

You see, for the Pharisees and Sadducees this is all outward stuff, it's all about keeping the rules, adhering to the dogma, a visible piety which masks a set of attitudes quite at odds with the values of the Kingdom of God, values of love, compassion, grace. And the idea that such things as the Pharisees stress are what the Kingdom is all about is a pervasive one: it seeps into the consciousness of others and starts to affect all that they do – just like yeast in dough.

And, sadly, it continues to do so. We don't have Pharisees and Sadducees any more – at least, not in name. But we have those who claim to be followers of Christ, or who would call themselves Christian, or want to identify themselves with the idea of Christianity, but at the same time demonstrate attitudes and values that are quite at odds with the Kingdom of God, quite opposed to the teaching of the kingly Messiah.

Much has been said in the media over the past couple of weeks about the comments of David Cameron in his interview with the *Church Times*. He has claimed, to the delight of some and the disgust of others, that this is still a Christian country. Of course, there are many people who would call themselves Christian almost by default – and if you go by numbers like that, by percentages of people who claim to be Christian on census forms and the like, then there is maybe still a case for saying that we're more Christian than anything else. There is simply a kind of appearance of Christianity, a veneer of the things that people think are what Christianity is all about – an outward show, if you like. But that “yeast” has been doing its work in recent decades.

The Pharisees and Sadducees have been spreading their yeast. From all parts of the political spectrum, values and attitudes have been changing, moving away from the values and attitudes of the Kingdom of God. David Cameron and his fellow travellers in the political elite of this country have presided over policies and pronouncements which have moved us a long way away from the teachings of Jesus. Just think back over the past four or five decades and think of the way things have changed – changes that have been enshrined in law and legislation.

We have seen the glorification of greed, the idea that everything must come down to money – to profit and acquisition – all put down to the impersonal, mechanical forces of “The Market” Usury has become the cornerstone on which our economy is built – although we don't call it that, of course: we refer to credit and interest and other more acceptable words. Divorce has been made more accessible and more acceptable than ever before. Indeed, marriage itself has been redefined and devalued. Families and married couples are discriminated against in fiscal terms. We have done away with any idea of a day of rest, a Sabbath – and, again, many of those who find themselves unable to accept Sunday working are forced from their jobs. The poor have been sidelined at the expense of the rich. My rights have taken the place of my responsibilities. Our country is renowned the world over for its ability to manufacture and market weapons of war and instruments of torture. The grossest obscenity, blasphemy and pornography are protected by laws about freedom of expression. Gambling is encouraged in every sphere – from those who gamble their own money so easily in the bookies and on their tablets and mobiles, to those who gamble other people's money in board rooms and on the trading floors. A person's “net worth” is

calculated in purely financial terms. The self reigns supreme – and politicians, academics and others try to justify in terms of psychology and therapy. Tell me what things there are the hall-marks of a Christian country? Like the Pharisees and the Sadducees uniting in their opposition to the values of the Kingdom of God, Cameron, Brown, Blair, Major and Thatcher and their colleagues have all at some point hi-jacked the rhetoric of religion to cloak their own anti-Kingdom agendas – probably (almost certainly) not a conscious desire to oppose the values of the Kingdom of God, but that’s the point of the “yeast” analogy: it’s insidious and difficult to spot at work. We probably haven’t noticed this gradual slide, this permeating of the yeast, but it’s there, alright.

And unfortunately the church of Jesus Christ has also been permeated by that “*yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees*”. The desire to be seen to be doing the right things, rather than fostering the attitudes and values which will actually lead to the right things being done, the gradual acceptance of the values and attitudes of the culture around us – culture creep – has infected us all. There is so much emphasis on doing and saying the right things, so much stress on the right image, so much time spent on the peripherals, that the radical attractiveness of the message of the Kingdom is completely obliterated by all the things that do not matter. Whether it be the Christianity-by-numbers of the conservatives and charismatics or the stifling political correctness of the liberals, the easy formalism of the traditionalists or the “we’ve-got-to-make-a-statement” of the post-modern, post-evangelical, post-everything-else bandwagon-jumpers, image is the thing: “Let’s do this and everyone will see what great Christians we are.”

Jesus says, “*Do you still not get it? Are you still in the dark over this?*” This is not about the outward. Don’t worry about that: it will all fall into place. This is about the heart – about attitudes and values. Mark’s version of this episode has Jesus talking about the disciples hearts being hardened (*Mark 8:17*). Hard hearts which will not yield to God and to his message. It’s a phrase which is used again and again in the Old Testament, in the words of the prophets who first pointed men and women towards the Kingdom of God, who predicted the renewal and restoration of God’s sovereign rule in his creation, who first preached the “*glad tidings*” that Jesus came to proclaim and demonstrate. Again and again the prophets accused the people – people who made all the right sacrifices, said all the right words, recited all the right creeds – accused them of having the wrong attitudes, of living loveless and selfish lives.

You see, you and I can behave just as the Pharisees did – sing our songs with enthusiasm and read the right version of the Bible, mutter our amens to John Stott and Jeff Lucas, don our Sunday best and give our proper gifts (or, if you’re that way inclined, pepper our conversations with genderless pronouns, ask deep and searching questions about the authenticity of Second Isaiah, sign petitions in support of gay bishops, wring our hands over synod decisions) – but if our hearts are not right, if we are preoccupied

with the outward signs, the material proofs, then we have lost the point of all that Jesus came to say and do. It's attitude that counts – attitude in the old sense of the word. You can do all you like in the way of trying to serve God so that others can see it all – attending all the meetings, going on the rotas, saying the right words, giving plenty of time and money – but if you're still slagging off others, still harbouring resentments, still wishing you didn't have to do it all, still preoccupied with the way other people see you, still content to allow the culture around to influence and mould your own life as you succumb to the temptation to acquire more stuff, then your attitude is wrong.

William Barclay once wrote, "*Christianity does not mean reciting a creed; it means knowing a person.*" Of course, following Jesus the Kingly Messiah necessarily means that you believe certain things about him – and about what he represents. Of course, following Jesus is not some kind of sentimental, easy alternative to living in the real world (as we have already seen in Matthew's Gospel and we shall continue to see when we get a bit further on in this book). But following Jesus is a heck of a lot harder than simply assenting to a creed – and a good deal more risky.

The disciples in the boat with Jesus, used to a religion that put a great deal of emphasis on doing things – and being seen to be doing them – a religion heavily influenced (yeasted?) at that time by the Pharisees, couldn't yet grasp that Jesus was calling them into a **relationship** with him that would draw them into the life of the Kingdom of God. And he wanted them to realise that it was all a question of the heart, of being in tune with God himself rather than being in tune with what people said about God. Once that was right, the rest would fall into place.

And that's the challenge that has been before us since we first glimpsed the possibilities of life in the amazing Kingdom that Jesus the Messiah has come to inaugurate. Are we content that our leaders call this a Christian country while steadily trying to do away with any real sign of Kingdom values? Are we allowing this "yeast" – the yeast of greed and selfishness and lack of compassion – to work its way into every area of our lives, to influence our attitudes and values, to set the agenda for our own lives, to infiltrate our churches, to inspire our young people? Do we want to keep trying to do the right thing by ticking the doctrinal boxes and singing "sound" songs? Or do we want to walk in the risky, rocky footsteps of the one who came to show us what the Kingdom of God looks like, who said he is the only way back to friendship with God, the only sure hope for an eternal future in heaven? "*Do you still not understand? ... Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.*"

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Jesus and his disciples are making their way by boat across the lake after the feeding of the four thousand. As they are sailing across the lake they realise that they've forgotten to get any bread for themselves and there's nothing to eat in the boat. Jesus takes that as the cue to say "*Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.*" As they've been talking about bread the disciples take it literally and Jesus starts berating them.

Jesus is clearly talking figuratively here. Time and time again in the Bible – in both Old and New Testaments – yeast is used as a metaphor for corruption, for the insidious working of evil within a larger society or group (*Matthew 13:33* is the only time yeast is mentioned positively). But the disciples are taking it all literally because at this moment they are preoccupied with the issue of real bread – they don't have enough for their lunch. And that is exactly the problem Jesus is talking about. The disciples are preoccupied with the material, with bread for themselves. And they do not need to be anxious about that. "*Don't worry about that,*" says Jesus. "*That's exactly what the Pharisees are doing. Look! I've proved in these two picnics – not once but twice – that I can meet your material needs, haven't I? You still don't get it, do you?*" And there is a clue as to what this "*yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees*" is all about. They have become preoccupied with the external, the material, the easily seen. Jesus is talking about the heart, about inner transformation, about attitudes.

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"Christianity does not mean reciting a creed; it means knowing a person" (William Barclay). The disciples in the boat with Jesus, used to a religion that put a great deal of emphasis on doing things – and being seen to be doing them – a religion heavily "yeasted" at that time by the Pharisees, couldn't yet grasp that Jesus was calling them into a **relationship** with him that would draw them into the life of the Kingdom of God. And he wanted them to realise that it was all a question of the heart, of being in tune with God himself. Once that was right, the rest would fall into place.

Questions for discussion

1. Why do the Pharisees and Sadducees want Jesus to "*show them a sign*"? And why will Jesus not do that?
2. What do you think Jesus means by "*the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees*"? Give some examples of how that might work today.
3. Jesus says "*Be on your guard against the yeast*". How can we do that? And how can we warn others about it?
4. What do you consider to be the most pervasive influence from the wider culture on our lives today? How should we respond to that specific danger?
5. Do you agree with David Cameron's comment that this is still a Christian country? Why/why not?