

“FOLLOWING THE KING – 74”

Matthew 23:13-39

One of the things about being brought up in a good Christian family, very much centred on the Bible (in those days the good old King James Version) was that much of our speech was peppered with archaic phrases. My auntie was always threatening to “slay” us when the heads of her daffs disappeared during games of football in her garden. And my grandmother was forever pronouncing “*Woe betide you*”, if anything went wrong: “Woe betide you when your father gets home,” “Woe betide you when I tell your mother,” “Woe betide – I’ll tan your hide” (not strictly biblical, but it did rhyme!). It was a phrase filled with dread for us as young kids, because we knew something unpleasant was going to happen.

Jesus uses the phrase seven times in the verses we’ve just read. (It’s eight times if you’ve got a version with *v14* in it, but that doesn’t appear in most Bibles because it was clearly added to Matthew’s Gospel quite some time later.) He is here continuing that blistering attack on the Pharisees and Teachers of the law that began at the beginning of this chapter 13. In his book about Matthew’s Gospel, Martin Goldsmith entitles the chapter on this section “*The Battle Hots Up*” – and it certainly does as Jesus rips into these leaders of the people in what another commentator calls “*one of the most, if not **the** most painful [passages] in the New Testament.*”.

This is, if you like, the negative image of the picture painted in *The Sermon On The Mount* where Jesus pronounces blessings on those who follow his ways, who subscribe to the values of the Kingdom of Heaven. The blessings have been replaced by woes. The Greek word is “*Ouai*”, which has that kind of onomatopoeic wailing sound that can denote both incandescent anger and deep, deep sadness. I don’t really want to go into each of these woes in great detail, this morning, but if you’ve got your Bible open at this chapter, let me just run through them quickly and point out the nub of Jesus’ criticism.

These Pharisees and their associates didn’t want anything to do with the Kingdom as Jesus portrayed it and they were doing all in their power to prevent other people being involved (*v13*). Despite their role as teachers and leaders of the people, they were showing no inclination to lead people in the ways of God.

They tried to put a lot of effort into winning people over to their particular take on religion, but once they’d got them there it was clear that this was a dead religion with nothing to commend it and those who’d decided to follow them were following them into a dead end – or, indeed, into hell itself (*v15*).

They had got their priorities completely wrong, and that was shown in the way they treated the swearing of oaths (*vv16-22*). They were always trying to find ways round the oaths they swore, accepting the need

for them, but doing their best to find ways to nullify their effects. It was a bit like keeping your fingers crossed behind your back so that you could say you didn't really mean it in the first place.

They were supposed to be Teachers of the Law, but, again, they'd got their priorities wrong. They loved to do all the fiddly bits – tithing their herbs (which was almost totally useless as 10% of a bunch of mint didn't amount to very much at all) but completely missing the point of “*justice and mercy and faithfulness*” (vv23,24). Remember what the prophet Micah said was the point of following God in *Micah 6:8*? Well, these supposed Men of God were totally ignoring it all, but justifying it by saying that at least they'd sacrificed a pinch of cumin. In a memorable image, Jesus describes it as straining out the smallest insects, but swallowing a camel!

They made a lot of fuss about ritual cleanliness, polishing up the outside of the cup, while the inside was full of muck (vv25,26). I can remember plenty of people I've come across who will offer you a cup of tea in a rather nice cup, but when you look inside, it's got that thick brown deposit of years and years of not properly washed up tea stains in it. Now there were some pretty intricate laws about washing eating utensils that the Pharisees had come up with over the years and there's a big element of that in Jesus' criticism here, but he's also moving towards what we discover in the next woe – that the outside appearance of something – of someone – can be very deceptive.

Because in this next one, he actually says, “*You are like ...*” The Jewish people were to have nothing to do with dead bodies – of people, or carcasses of animals. Any kind of contact would render them ritually unclean, and therefore unable to worship or even meet together with others normally. Tombs were often given a coat of whitewash to make them obvious, so people didn't bump into them accidentally and end up unclean. But, as with any freshly painted object, it made them look rather nice on the outside, even though they contained all kinds of rotting flesh and “*everything unclean*” (vv27,28). I remember when I was canoeing once, coming across a large trout on the surface of the river. It looked beautiful – the summer sun was shimmering off its scales, and it seemed plump and bright. I reached out to pick it up and my hand went straight through the skin into a mess of rotting fish flesh that stank to high heaven! And Jesus is saying that these leaders, in their fine clothes and their attention to ritual detail – men who seemed to be fine examples of everything a good citizen, a good Jew, a good follower of God's law should be – actually had hearts and minds full of muck and filth.

Finally he upbraids them for their professed regard for the Hebrew prophets of old and their lavish memorials for them (vv29-32). This was apparently a period when there was a lot of this kind of thing going on – building memorials – very probably as a way of reminding themselves of their national and religious heritage at a time when they were under occupation by a foreign power. But Jesus says they are

still as opposed to the words of the prophets as their forefathers who murdered them were. That's obvious in their reaction to John the Baptist and to Jesus. And he goes on to say that he will send people to warn them of their need of God, but he expects them to deal with them as the Old Testament prophets were dealt with – persecution and execution. After all, they killed all the prophets from A to Z. [Actually it's not A-Z, as Z isn't the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It's from Abel in *Genesis*, the first book of their Scriptures, to Zechariah in *2 Chronicles*, the last book in their Scriptures.]

Now, as we've said before, not all Pharisees were bad and there was an underlying desire in very many of them to do the right thing. It's just that most of them had lost sight of the right thing – and why they were supposed to be doing it. Even today, amongst an enormous number of good leaders in the Church, there are bad apples, those of whom similar things could be said. I can clearly remember a man I came across in London: we'll call him John – he was a church leader of some repute within a section of the church: he'd written books, spoken at conferences, was highly regarded in a prison ministry. We had a lady who joined our church from the Jehovah's Witnesses. She was baptised and had a great ministry following the JWs round and telling people not to listen to them. John met her and convinced her to join him going round and warning people against Billy Graham, who was not far off being the Antichrist, according to John, because he'd recently met the Pope. Their ministry then became one of preventing others seeing the Kingdom of God as Billy Graham presented it. After I moved up here, I learned that this man had left his wife and moved in with the ex-JW. That ticks quite a few of Jesus' boxes here.

But it's not just church leaders who need to be careful. It's something that we all need to take heed of. Michael Green reminds us of that in these words from his book about Matthew's Gospel. [BST p245]

You see, in all of this, the real enemy, the real target of Jesus' anger and sadness is not the Pharisees or the Teachers of the Law, but hypocrisy itself. The word "*hypocrite*" appears in all these declarations of woe except one. "*Hypocrite*" is a word from the Greek world of the theatre. It started off referring to the masks that were worn on stage. Then it became a word for the actors themselves. Then it came to mean those who acted out a part in their everyday lives, who tried to make themselves look like something they weren't – what we now think of as a hypocrite. So this isn't just an entertaining attack on other particular people, an example of Jesus bringing down the puffed up and those who like to put themselves on pedestals. This is a warning to us.

This is about giving ourselves airs and graces – particularly in the context of our professed faith. It's about having the wrong priorities, about forgetting what we're supposed to be doing and why. It's about losing our sense of proportion in matters spiritual. It's about honesty and integrity, transparency and vulnerability. It's something to which each and every one of us should pay attention – even in Wade

Street Church! Yes, leaders especially need to take heed, but only in the sense that they are often more visible in their roles. Just because you're not a leader doesn't mean that God can't see into the murky depths of your heart and mind under that wonderfully whitewashed exterior. Pay attention to Jesus' words here because nothing will put others off the message of the Gospel more quickly and more emphatically than the whiff of hypocrisy amongst those who profess to follow him.

But we also need to pay very great attention to words with which Jesus ends this diatribe – the very last words he speaks to the people in Matthew's Gospel. In a sense this is the climax of his message to them. He'll have things to say to his disciples (as we'll see in coming weeks), and to the authorities as he stands accused before them on Good Friday, but this is the end of what he has to say to the crowds who have been following him around and listening to his message of the coming Kingdom of God. It actually goes to the very heart of the Good News that he came to proclaim.

Look at what he says in v37. If the woes have been pronounced in sadness and anger, these words are full of sadness and regret. Here we encounter the loving core of Jesus' being and of his mission. "*How often I have longed to gather you,*" he says. Can you hear the deep desire of Jesus in those words? He longs to gather people to himself. It's his deepest desire. It's what he was sent into this world to do.

God created this world good in every way and into its pristine perfection he placed humanity – men and women who would enjoy his protection and provision, with whom he could build a relationship; people who would find fulfilment and deep satisfaction in living close to their Creator and making the most of his world. Evil somehow got into that world and drove a wedge between God and his creation. Men and women wandered off to do their own thing, free, so they thought, from the need to be close to God, free to run the world as they wanted.

But – not having made it themselves – they didn't really know how it worked and how they could get the best out of it without God there to help, so fulfilment became alienation, satisfaction became dislocation and a strange, indescribable longing for something they sensed was there but couldn't find. For centuries, God sent his prophets and preachers to point them in the right direction, to give them a vision of what life should be life under his benevolent rule, in his "Kingdom", but it made no difference. God wanted his people back, but they wouldn't come.

So he sent Jesus. Jesus provided glimpses in his own life and ministry of what that Kingdom would be like. He told stories about it and discussed it with his friends and his opponents, all the while longing that he could draw people into it. In the end he died in the attempt – but came back to life to demonstrate that even death couldn't defeat God's longing to draw people back to him. All people needed to do was to be

willing to be drawn in and willing to follow God's ways – the ways he knew would help people to get the best out of life now and on into the eternal future.

And here Jesus expresses that deep longing, the longing of the Father that is at the very heart of the Son's mission. He longs to draw you to himself, away from the tentacles of evil and hypocrisy, into the holiness, the integrity and purity of life in his Kingdom and into the eternal safety and security of the presence of God.

When my grandma shouted "*Woe betide*" at us, it wasn't because she wanted bad things to happen to us, but because she wanted good things. It was a warning, not a threat. It came out of a heart of love, a heart that I know prayed for us day by day by day. Jesus doesn't threaten. He warns. And he warns because he would much, much rather we were willing to be drawn close to him – just like a hen draws in her chicks for protection and help – than try and make our own way through a world that is perilously tilting towards evil.

Yes, of course we need to do all that we can to avoid being drawn into living a life of hypocrisy. So we need to make sure we heed these words of Jesus. It is the integrity of God's people, just as much as the message that we declare, that will connect with people. Indeed, as Jesus implies here, the message can often be negated by the life of the person proclaiming it in some people's eyes.

But what we really need to grasp in all of this is that Jesus really does love us – he really does love **you**. He is longing for you to accept his offer of eternal peace and security, and of satisfaction and fulfilment – living life to the full, as he puts it in *John 10:10* – and wants you to respond to that. Part of his sadness in these words is that the people "*were not willing*". There's another opportunity today to reach out and respond to him, to acknowledge his longing for you and accept his amazing gift of life.

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Questions for discussion

1. Why do we hate being called hypocrites? In what ways can you see hypocrisy demonstrated in the world and in the church today? (Be careful!)
2. Read through the woes Jesus pronounces (*vv13-31*). Are there any which particularly stick out for you? Can you think of contemporary equivalents?
3. Is there anything that you find particularly striking about Jesus' use of the hen image? Why?
4. Why do you think people were/are unwilling to be drawn to Jesus? How can we help them appreciate Jesus' longing for them?
5. What are you going to do as a result of reading this passage?