

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

5th October 2008

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

SUNDAY BETWEEN 30 OCTOBER & 5 NOVEMBER - Year A

[Based on the Gospel for today viz. Matthew 23:1-12]

No doubt we all feel disappointed and let down when a clergyman, or woman, loses out against temptation, and falls from grace. It becomes a great scandal, and the media has a self-righteous field-day. The reputation of the Church as a whole suffers, and we ourselves are embarrassed, as non-Church people say: "There's ya Church for ya!" and use the opportunity to excuse their absence from worship and their own weakness of character. The very nature of a priest's job puts him up front - literally in leading worship, and also in the life of the community as a highly visible person.

But all who profess and call themselves Christians need to be aware of the danger of claiming to be one thing and showing by their actions and way of life that their Christianity is superficial. The preaching in this case is not in words, but in action - or lack of action.

It is also true to say "Practice makes perfect". People who play sport know that well. But it also applies to the Christian lifestyle. The more we pray and think about the teachings of Jesus, the more likely we are to live out our beliefs in a sincere way. Regrettably many people spend far more time practising their sporting or other abilities and interests, than in becoming more proficient in their discipleship. So we have those who say: "I'm as good as those who go to church", which may be true in terms of social behaviour, but is not so in terms of worship and knowledge of God's way and of His requirements of people. In our Lord's day, and indeed as often recorded in the writings of the Old Testament, the leaders of worship, the priests and the scribes and the Pharisees, were dishonest in their service and brought true religion into disrepute. Their teaching was hollow because it carried no conviction. They did not keep the Law of God themselves, and so could not expect the people to. Their irresponsible behaviour in matters religious could not inspire their people to keep in the straight and narrow path of true faith. We can see for ourselves how that happens, when we hear the cynicism of people with regard to politicians and policemen. Which is very unfair, and sad, as the reputation of all parliamentarians and all members of the Police Force is smeared because of the dishonesty or self-seeking or nest-feathering of a few. It is so much worse when these people hold high office, with solemn responsibilities.

In spite of the laxness and dishonesty of many of the priests of the Old Testament - all down the ages - true religion always survived among some of the Chosen People. God's plan could not then, and cannot now, be thwarted by unworthy servants. Although it is undoubtedly true that the unfaithful do hold up and delay the working-out of the salvation of mankind. And they turn away from their own hope of salvation, and God's plan for them.

In the time of Jesus, the scribes and the Pharisees preferred to teach the laws of God, rather than faithfully carry them out themselves. They insisted on the letter of the Law, rather than the spirit of it. Time and time again in the Scriptures we have stories of Jesus clashing with the Pharisees because of their unreasonable harshness in interpreting God's Law. If the Church of today is not careful and compassionate, and tries to enforce every rule and regulation to the letter, we will have people feeling forced to disobey because of their particular circumstances. The Roman Catholic Church's edict prohibiting contraception is a case in point. Both clergy and people have to be very careful to ask: "What would Jesus have done?" And be ready to interpret laws and rules and regulations with compassion and concern, remembering of course that the Church's requirements are intended to uphold Christ's standards and should not lightly be trifled with. Too often we are apologetic and weak where we should be strong, and stand firm, maintaining the Faith in the face of opposition, indifference, and faint-heartedness. It is not always easy to keep the balance.

The Pharisees were carried away with their self-importance. They exaggerated the ceremonial robes they wore, so that people would be aware of their importance. They loved the kudos their position brought - the best places at feasts, reserved seats in the synagogues, recognition in the market place, and so on. These things took precedence over their proper role. Now, the wearing of robes and the sitting in special seats in church is a fairly sensitive topic among the clergy - which is a healthy thing, because no-one wants the charge of Pharisaism put on them! Yet there is tradition and dignity of office involved in all this. A correspondent wrote to a church newspaper some time ago commenting on the wearing of vestments and ecclesiastical clobber. He had spent some time as a missionary among aboriginal people and was scathing about the wearing of vestments as being unnecessary. Yet it apparently did not occur to him that aboriginal people use paint and feathers, and in some places, elaborate headgear in their rites and ceremonies. There seems to be an innate desire in human beings to use ceremonial dress to dignify both religious and civic occasions. Consider baptismal gowns and bridal array for instance, as well as elaborate uniforms for military personnel on occasion.

And what of the stricture: "Call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father - the one in heaven."? It is a traditional address for the clergy, of ancient tradition, but many people dislike the term because of this verse. Yet we teach our children to call their sires "father"! And what about: "You are not to be called Rabbi" - which may be translated as Master - which has become Mister! Many who would not dream of calling a priest

"Father" have no difficulty in calling him "Mister"! Or "Padre", which is Latin for "Father"!

Perhaps this is nit-picking, and surely true religion is far more important than robes or titles. But people do get hung up on such small matters. And Jesus did warn people about letting the wearing of robes and the use of titles come between them and their understanding of the Faith. For these are external things, used to express solemnity, dignity of office, respect for those called to certain responsibilities in the Church. They must never be allowed to become of primary importance. The vision of true discipleship can become blurred through undue concentration on things not crucial to salvation, but which become contentious matters and a burden. Can become blurred through an insincere approach to prayer and worship. Can become blurred by ambitious desires to gain recognition and honour and power.

The Pharisees were blinded by their own self-importance, and got carried away by power and position and the praises of men. Because of their unwillingness to change their ways and repent, they were left behind. The challenge for those of us who are truly committed, is to stand firm and uphold the Faith.

Even though our lives may be very ordinary by the world's standards, by practising what we preach we can play an important part in God's plan for the world. Do not be like the Pharisees "for they do not practice what they teach", said Jesus. On the contrary, practice what you teach, or what you are taught in the Faith, for practice makes perfect.

AMEN

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

12th October 2008

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

SUNDAY BETWEEN 9 & 15 OCTOBER - Year A

"Friend", asked the king, "how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" (Matt.22:12)

In today's Gospel passage we have a parable - or rather a double parable - in which two breaches of etiquette are described. Guests are invited to a wedding banquet, and not only do they refuse to attend but they abuse the messengers. Another guest does attend, a late invitation certainly, but does not bother to dress for the occasion.

The details of the story seem to us to be rather strange and unnatural: the abuse and then the killing of the servants who carried the invitations; the destruction of the murderers and their city even as the wedding feast is waiting to be served; the ejection of a guest just because he had not put on his best suit - all these details of the story seem rather excessive actions, by any standards. But of course this is a parable where the details are deliberately over-drawn to catch the attention of the hearers.

Jesus clearly intended His audience to understand firstly God's dealings with the Jewish nation and the disobedience of those people to Him: the Prophets went to them time and time again and were either ignored or brutally treated and killed. So the message is that the New Covenant will by-pass the Jews if they will not accept it, and the Gentiles, the non-Jews will replace them.

Secondly, Jesus clearly intended His audience to understand that it is not enough just to hear the preaching of the Good News of the Kingdom - they must also respond to it in the proper way. The guest not wearing the proper clothes was thrown out, not really because of his dress, but because he didn't care.

Probably most of us are at heart conformist, and we hate the thought of turning up to some function in the wrong clothing. What a night-mare to mistake a formal ball for a fancy-dress dance and to turn up in some outrageous rig-out! Or like the lady from a Station property in the North who went to an informal dance after a rodeo regally dressed in a long evening gown and tiara! She was very mortified!

Some years ago Diocesan Synod was held at the Conference Centre at Melrose during a very hot spell. The clergy and lay people had changed into casual, light-weight gear and it

was all very informal. A priest from the Diocese of Adelaide arrived as a visitor and observer, dressed very properly in jet-black, from his shoes to his homburg hat! He was not to know, poor chap, about how informal our Synod can be, especially in a heat wave. But he was not ejected -he was in fact probably the only one there wearing the right clothes!

But the parable Jesus told really has nothing to do with clothes. It does have everything to do with **attitude of mind**. Any one of us can be caught here today in the wrong clothes, figuratively speaking, whether we happen to be formally or casually dressed. Attitude of mind is what counts: to be clothed in the right attitude of mind.

Think back to the man who went to the king's wedding feast. What about his attitude of mind? Isn't it obvious: an attitude of indifference - he didn't care, he couldn't be bothered. And the implication of his wrong clothes was that he didn't take the occasion seriously. To him it wasn't important; he needn't trouble. Perhaps he thought that as his was an invitation coming after others had rejected theirs outright, that he was doing the king a favour by even being there!

So Jesus might ask us: are we here clothed in the right frame of mind as we gather together in this church? Are we clothed with a sense of gratitude to God for all His mercies; and with a desire to worship the Lord of Life; and with penitence for our shortcomings; and with an awareness of our need of grace? Or are we here, feeling a little self-righteous; favouring God with our presence; come to try and get Him to do something for us? So Jesus might ask.

It may be that if we are not so patronising of Almighty God as to imagine that He should be grateful to us for recognizing His existence, that we imagine that we are earning our souls' salvation by our attendance, earning another good mark in God's record book.

The garments of patronage and merit-earning are the wrong clothes. And if we come wearing them, we are advertising that we have misjudged the occasion. The right way to see the Christian gospel is as an open invitation for us all to come and partake of the wedding banquet - God's provision of wholeness both in this life and the next, a wholeness that not even death can destroy. And we are invited whatever our background, whatever our sins, whatever our limited understanding: all we need to do is to come and accept the invitation - with this proviso: we must be wearing the right clothes, clad in the right frame of mind.

Notice that the man had nothing to say to the king's question: "How did you get in here without wedding clothes?" By his silence he admitted that he knew quite well what the occasion required, and that he had no excuse or explanation to offer. His offence was that, knowing what was required, he did not take it seriously.

The ignorant and the confused will receive more sympathy at the Judgement than those who do understand and do not bother. With the former there is hope that they will eventually learn. But to understand the words "the Body, the Blood, of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for you preserve your body and soul to everlasting life", and then not to care, is to ask to be thrown into the darkness. In fact we put ourselves out, and then it is very difficult to bring ourselves to seek to return, as anyone who has strayed from the Church and returned can tell you.

We are members of Christ's Church. We have said "Yes" to Christ's invitation. Sadly there are so many people today who once said "Yes" and who are now tepid in their faith. Men and women who see them-selves as Christians, but who rarely worship in church, who live respectable lives, by the world's standards, yet who give religion less than first place in their, lives, whose "Yes" is qualified by "Provided it doesn't cost anything in time , money, service, self--sacrifice". These are the people without the wedding garment, who are unworthy of their invitation.

So today's Gospel asks us two questions which we need to consider seriously. The first part asks us if we have availed ourselves of the great invitation. The second asks us if we are trying to fit ourselves to share in the king's banquet, to be members of the kingdom of God. Many are invited: few are chosen - because they do not take their invitation seriously. God grant that we may be amongst those who care, and properly respond.

AMEN

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

19th October 2008

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

SUNDAY BETWEEN 16 & 22 OCTOBER - Year A

[Based on the Gospel for today viz. Matthew 22 verses 15-33]

Jesus said to the Pharisees: "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." (v.21)

In brief, the Gospel for today reminds us that we are in a very real sense, citizens of two worlds, while the Epistle Reading reminds us that our main concern and objective must be towards things heavenly. The incident in the Gospel describes a familiar situation for our Lord. Once again His antagonists were trying to manoeuvre Him into a verbal corner.

The payment of tribute money to the Romans was a very sore point with the Jews. They hated their position as a conquered nation and longed for deliverance. Taxpaying is looked on by everybody as an unpleasant necessity - but to have to pay taxes as a subservient people to a hated oppressor is even worse. The Pharisees thought that if Jesus could be made to say that they ought not pay the taxes, they would be able to accuse Him of treasonable action, as being a revolutionary, and the Roman authorities would speedily execute Him and so remove the troublemaker. On the other hand if He said it was their duty to pay taxes, then they could accuse Him of being unfaithful to His own people. It was like being required to answer "Yes" or "No" to the question "Have you stopped beating your wife yet?"

The way in which the question was put was pure hypocrisy, and all the more odious because it was veiled by flattery: "Teacher, we know you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one, for you do not regard people with partiality." But Jesus, who knows the hearts of all, was well aware of their malice and hatred. He called for a Roman coin, currency with which the tribute had to be paid. Like our own coins and unlike Jewish coins, the Roman coins bore a representation of the head of the Emperor. Jesus was able to point to the head and the superscription and deliver His superb, unanswerable reply, summing up for all time what the Christian's attitude to the State should be, and what should at the same time be his attitude and duty to God. That coin represented Roman rule, with all that that meant: security of property, safety of the individual, ease of travel throughout the world of that time, and stable if stern rule - the Pax Romana, holding the world to relative peace by sheer force. Jesus showed that it was wrong to accept the undoubted benefits of that rule, and refuse to pay for

them. The tribute paid to Rome was not a gift but the payment of debt. He also showed that the payment of such a debt was no hindrance to the payment of obligation to God.

This incident brings before us the question of our Christian duty to the State under which we live. St. Paul claimed that the State is of divine appointment, in his letter to the Christians of Rome, for he wrote: "You must obey the governing authorities. Since all government comes from God, the civil authorities were appointed by God, and so anyone who resists authority is rebelling against God's decision, and such an act is bound to be punished. The State is there to serve God for your benefit. If you break the law, however, you may well have to fear: the bearing of the sword has its significance. The authorities are there to serve God: they carry out God's revenge by punishing wrongdoers." There is more in that vein in chapter 13 of the Epistle to the Romans - if only our politicians would study it! You might like to look at it later - Romans 13. Perhaps Paul was stating the ideal, for good men and women do suffer at times at the hands of rulers and governments who he claims are appointed by God. Indeed he himself was unjustly executed at the hands of the State authorities.

So we have duties to the State. Included are obedience to its laws and participation in its life. We ought to be acquainted with the laws by which we are governed. We ought also to participate in the carrying-out of good government and bear our share of its financial burdens. Easier said than done of course, if we happen to disagree with certain actions of the government!

But the Christian should be involved in the political sphere, and serve the community in which he lives and from which he draws his livelihood. The Church cannot of course be committed to any political party as such, but it must proclaim the general principles on which the life of society should be based. It is the task of the individual Christian to do his utmost to implement those principles. He should also be concerned about politics, doing his best to influence the policy of whichever party he supports and doing his best to see that Christian men and women are elected.

Similarly in local Government affairs. In our communities there is a constant need for dedicated, voluntary workers who are prepared to serve honestly and devotedly the town and district in which they live. The Christian is not to withdraw from the world, but to play his or her part fully and responsibly.

There are such people in Parliament and Local Government, although cynics might curl their lips. Once or twice a year, clergy receive an invitation to a Prayer Breakfast in Canberra! A bit far to go from here, but it does show that there is a Christian witness there. So it does happen - but all too rarely.

Our highest duty is to God, and we fulfill this in one way by serving the community in which we live.

The responsibility of government: Commonwealth, State, or Local, is to administer rules to enable us to live in order and peace. But the power must be used in accordance with the laws of God, following the teachings of Christ. If the State fails to do this, the Christian must protest and seek to right the wrong. Fortunately, in this country Christian activists and critics are not likely to be imprisoned by the authorities, or murdered by extremist fanatics, as happens from time to time in other countries. But we may find ourselves ridiculed and insulted when we speak out. And our leaders have spoken out in the great moral issues such as euthanasia and abortion, but their words are not always listened to or reported by the media. You and I are not likely to be heard on a national scale, but, yes there are issues in our communities where we ought to speak out. Christians must all the time be working to make society and the life of our community and country more Christian, more humane, more just, more compassionate. Much has been done, but much remains to be done. Even the humblest of us has the power to influence others, and we must do this as we talk with our friends and neighbours and workmates. And our stated opinions are strengthened by the quality of the lives we lead. The community of actual Christians may be numerically small, but their influence is considerable.

It is not always easy to stand for what is right, even amongst our friends; to stand up for the things of God; to make protest against wrong, regardless of cost and possible loss of popularity. But our supreme duty is to God, and we must render or give back to God those things which belong to Him.

AMEN

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

26th October 2008

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

SUNDAY BETWEEN 23 & 29 OCTOBER - Year A

[Based on the Gospel for today viz. Matthew 22:34-46]

Jesus said to the lawyer: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind You shall love your neighbour as yourself." (22:37 & 39)

There is a story from the days when principals of schools and colleges were often clergymen, that one such headmaster in Holy Orders had been spending some time in setting examination papers. The Sunday following, he was celebrating the Holy Communion from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, which included a full recitation of the Ten Commandments. He looked up from his B.C.P., adjusted spectacles, and said absentmindedly: "Not more than five of these need be attempted."

That story may remind us that the Ten Commandments are not to be regarded as a definitive list of rules for the practicing Christian. We know that very well of course, when we stop to think about it. Never-the-less, there are people who, when they are excusing their lack of churchgoing, say: "But I do keep the Ten Commandments!" In point of fact they keep only 3 or 4 of them. No doubt they do no murder; do not steal; even perhaps do not commit adultery; do not literally make to themselves a graven image and bow down to it. But do they not have other gods than the Holy Trinity? Plenty of people put their time and service and money into worldly affairs well ahead of the requirements of Almighty God. Do they not take the name of the Lord their God in vain? Do they not ignore the requirement to keep holy the day of worship? Do they always honour their fathers and their mothers? Do they not occasionally bear false witness against their neighbours? Not in a court of law perhaps, but how often do people maliciously gossip and spread untruths about others? And most certainly covetousness is alive and well in our society! The pokies, the scratchies, Lotto, and the rest draw people in with promises of wealth and glittering prizes - appealing to our covetousness. And lending organisations urge us to take out loans so that we can possess things which otherwise we only dream about having. Simplistic people overlook high rates of interest on overdrawn Bankcards, and the overall cost of the regular flutter. Oh yes, covetousness is a pernicious evil among us.

The lawyer in today's Gospel reading tried to get Jesus to commit Himself to selecting one commandment as being of greater importance than any other. Had Jesus done so, we can imagine His critics then saying triumphantly: "But what about such-and -such?" And then would ensue a less than enlightening argument. Jesus was not to be caught like that! He quoted a passage from Scripture, which the Pharisees being Biblical scholars, would well know: a quotation from the Book Deuteronomy - a great set of laws attributed to Moses himself: "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all

your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment." The parallel version in St. Mark's Gospel adds: "and with all your strength." For good measure Jesus added: "The second resembles it - you must love your neighbour as yourself". That quotation was taken from another great book of law, Leviticus. "On these two commandments," Jesus said, "hang the whole Law, and the Prophets also." That is, the pronouncements and the teachings of those early spokesmen of God.

Laws are necessary for our survival in a community. Some are man-made for orderly living and safeguards, and providing everyone knows the laws and keeps them, sports for instance like football and cricket can be played properly. Let someone break those laws and the game is messed up. Man-made laws can readily be changed, and provided everyone knows about the change life goes on as before. The change in the time of day, under Daylight saving is a good example of this. Not every country in the world drives on the proper side of the road like we do - but that is no problem provided you check the road rules first.

The laws of God are different, and we break them to our peril. They cannot be changed at our whim or by parliamentary decision, as an individual or as a nation. The commandments of God, rightly understood, are a reflection of God Himself, His character, and His purpose in creation. How often do people flout the rules of God, and then blame Him when disaster happens? Often in such cases, innocent people suffer along with the guilty - that is what happens when sin is let loose.

St. Paul tells us that the Law is like a schoolmaster, exercising discipline from outside. (Gal.3:24) We need a few basic rules about how to behave, just as we need to know how to make the best use of our car or our washing machine. We need to know the Maker's Instructions for running human life, and coping with relationships. Man is a moral being, a being who is free to make choices between right and wrong. Too often we make wrong choices - not because we are necessarily evil people, but we are weak, and self-centred, and stubborn, and lazy. We need a strength beyond our own strength to keep the laws of God, and we, as Christians, know or should know, the source of that strength which is freely available to us. Jesus not only set out the guidelines, but through His self-giving on the cross and the sending of the Holy Spirit, provided the means by which we can follow those guidelines. We call this spiritual strength, grace. We cannot get into the Kingdom of Heaven by merely keeping a set of rules - we have to give ourselves to God, open our hearts and minds to His influence, and pray for His grace.

Have you browsed through the Church Catechism lately? It is printed in the Book of Common Prayer and the newer Australian Prayer Book, but not alas in the short edition of A Prayer Book for Australia - only the big version which is a pity. But the Catechism is a very sound summary of Christian belief. With regard to what I have been saying, it states: "You know that you are not able to do these things by yourself, or to walk in the commandments of God, or to serve Him, without His special grace, which you must learn at all times to ask for by diligent prayer."

We might want to ask: "What exactly did Jesus mean, when He said "You shall love the Lord your God and your neighbour as yourself"? The Catechism answers it this way: "My duty towards God is, to believe in Him, to fear Him, and to love Him, with all my heart, with all my mind, with all my soul, and with all my strength; to worship Him, to give Him thanks, to put my whole trust in Him, to pray to Him; and to honour His holy name and His word; and to serve Him truly all the days of my life. My duty

towards my neighbour is, to love him as myself, and to do to others whatever I wish they would do to me; to love, honour and care for my parents; to honour and obey the Queen and all who are in authority under her; to submit myself to my teachers and spiritual pastors; to be respectful and courteous to all; to hurt no-one by word or deed; to bear no malice or hatred in my heart; to keep my body in temperance, soberness, and chastity; to be true and just in all my dealings; to keep my hands from pilfering and stealing, and my tongue from evil speaking, lying, and slandering; not to covet or desire things that belong to other people, but to learn to work honestly for my own living, and to do my duty in that state of life to which it shall please God to call me."

Great stuff, isn't it? The answer to the ills and problems of this suffering society. The sad thing is that it is nothing new. It has been before the Church constantly in that form for 340 years - since the Book of Common Prayer was first printed, and no doubt in some similar form long before that. It was not new teaching even by Jesus, when He summed up the Ten Commandments and the numerous derivations from them, because both of His Great Two are direct quotations from the Law of Moses, in the Books of the Old Testament we know as Deuteronomy and Leviticus. What is new is that Jesus saw these as the principle behind all law, and cut through the maze of regulations to the heart of the matter.

What was even newer was that Jesus not only taught the Two Great Commandments, but practiced them to the full in His own earthly life - loving God, by spending hours of prayer with His heavenly Father, and doing His will; and loving us, by accepting the very worst mankind could do to Him and declaring our forgiveness.

There is something better still: through the gift of the Holy Spirit of God, who is love, we are offered the power to love in the spirit of the Risen Christ and so enabled to fulfil our duty both to God and to our neighbour.

AMEN