**
5th November 2023
1 Thessalonians.2.9-13
Matthew 23.1-12

 Faith – a burden?**

*Gracious God, may your Living Word come to us afresh this morning. So, touch, we pray our minds and hearts with your grace and truth. Through Christ our Lord and in the power of your Spirit. Amen*
A few weeks ago, in the hallowed walls of The Royal Courts of Justice in The Strand, Dame Sue Carr was installed as England’s Chief Justice, the highest judge in the land. She’s the 98th person to hold that position and is the first woman ever to do so in the 800 years it’s been in existence.

Quite a thing to feel the hand of history tapping you on the shoulder inviting you to become part of a story that goes back centuries. And maybe the Pharisees felt it too because Matthew describes them as occupying Moses’ Seat.

What an honour to be numbered with such a giant from Israel’s past. The one who received the Ten Commandments and oversaw the evolution of a slave race who became a nomadic people, eventually ending up as a covenanted nation.

Moses’ contribution to the People’s identity is massive. So, to be associated with his legacy and described as sitting in his seat, that was massive too!

So, in many ways the Pharisees fit that role, the hand of history is upon them, and they sit in the Seat of Moses. And, I suspect, they really are not the bad guys that we Christians often make them into.

Even in Jesus’ day, and there were 6,000 of them around, they were popular, influential and highly respected. And perhaps this was because they had such a better press than their competitors, The Sadducees.

The Sadducees were elitist, and often got the top jobs as High Priests. They were hardliners and literalists when it came to the interpretation of the Torah, and they did not believe in an afterlife.

In just about every way the Pharisees were their opposites. They were relatively liberal in their Torah interpretation, always trying to apply scripture to the everyday, and probably making up too many rules in the process!

They were not hierarchical and, just to complete the contrast, they embraced the idea of an afterlife.

And yet it’s clear that Matthew really didn’t like them at all. And, maybe, it isn’t surprising.

Matthew writes his gospel after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. It was a terrible time to be Jewish. The Romans took direct control, and the temple was raised to the ground. It was a time of chaos and destruction. The office of High Priest finally came to an end as did the sacrificial system. The Sadducees did not survive post AD 70, in fact the only significant section of Jewish religious society that did were the Pharisees, now predominantly based in Gailee, as was Matthew.

And it’s this line of Jewish leaders, Pharisees, that eventually became the Rabbinical Jewish Communities that we are familiar with today.

In so many ways the Pharisees were the good guys! But obviously not all of them. And what’s new about that? Every organisation, community and church knows only too well that non typical, rogue members can so easily and quickly crash the reputation of the majority.

So, in today’s gospel Matthew has Jesus vigorously engage with some of them and perhaps something of the evangelist’s own bias creeps in too.

Inevitably some Pharisees were corrupt and Jesus criticises them for not practicing what they preach and even playing to the wrong audience, wearing clothes to impress their fellow countrymen rather than trying their best to honour God. It’s as if they had forgotten which way they were meant to be facing.

Their biggest failure of leadership is listed in verse 4: *They make up heavy loads and pile them on the shoulders of others…*It's an own goal when organised faith is viewed as nothing more than a burden. A burden of obligation. A burden of guilt. A burden of unreasonable belief.

Of course, making faith into a burden isn’t exclusive to the Pharisees, we in The Church have also become experts at sometimes crushing those who genuinely want to believe. So, rather than introduce them to a faith that can truly liberate, we insist, instead, on dogma or rituals that all too often can become a burden that is too heavy to bear.

The other day, at home, we both had a novel in our hands. Rachel, looked over her glasses and said how much she enjoyed being enveloped into the story, (I think she was reading Middlemarch) experiencing a different culture just by inhabiting the words on the page. She asked if I felt the same. Well, to be truthful I’d just got through a few pages from one of C.J. Samson’s medieval whodunnits, in which four non-conformists had been burnt at the stake. It was all very graphic, so, no, I don’t think *enjoying* was quite the word I would have used for these few pages. I came away grateful that I live in a day and age when the Church and State, so intertwined in those days, doesn’t burden me with such a heavy load, insisting that unless I practice faith in their way, and their way alone, I too might have been on the way to a martyr’s end.

Matthew 23 lays such a tragic charge at those who sat in the Seat of Moses. They made faith not a joy, but a burden.

In our own history there have been times when Church or State have been instruments of oppression rather than doorways to freedom and isn’t that why we say on this day as we recall a time of religious intolerance: *Remember, remember the 5th of November.*

By way of poignant contrast, back in Matthew 11 Jesus says: *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*And, indeed, there were religious leaders, Pharisees among them, who had found this to be personally and wonderfully true. Nicodemus was, perhaps the most prominent of that number, alongside Joseph of Arimathea. These were devout and good people who seem to have grasped this idea of Jesus that when faith is weighted down by too many intricate rules, it can become over complex, over codified and ultimately over bearing.

After his nocturnal encounter with Jesus, Nicodemus emerges like a man who has lost his burden, as one who has been born again, forgiven, loved and free.

And maybe none of this is that surprising because whether it’s writing a sermon or baking a cake, planning a family gathering or drawing up a community centre agenda, we can all make the task in hand too complicated. We can over egg the pudding and lose ourselves in issues, procedures, ingredients and ideas that are not essential.

Age and experience, hopefully, teach us that often less is more as we concentrate on what really matters.

I smiled a few years ago when some government guidelines were issued about youth work and the policy document covered about 30 pages. The local Boys’ Brigade Company of which I was chaplain realised that none of their leaders would wade through 30 pages, so they were relieved when BB headquarters issued every leader with a laminated card, the size of a credit card to be put in their back pocket for easy reference, on which were distilled the 5 key points from the 30page document.

Jesus did something similar when he distilled down the hundreds of commands advocated by the Scribes and Pharisees to just two: *To love the Lord your God with all your heart and your neighbour as yourself.* Going on to say: *There are no other commandments greater than these!*

So, maybe this is why Jesus can release us from heavy burdens, it’s because he somehow uncomplicates faith and teaches us what really matters.

I want to draw our thoughts to a close this morning with a brief word about another Pharisee, or at least a former one; Paul, the writer of our first reading from 1 Thessalonians.

Perhaps conscious of a past steeped in complex laws, Paul writes to the Thessalonians more as a beloved and gentle father in God and says: I appeal to you, I encourage you and I urge you to live a life worthy of your calling.

That’s a pastoral style of leadership worthy of all our attentions. And if I were preaching at an Induction Service, I might be tempted to make Paul’s words my theme; we are called not to lord it over people and make faith burdensome, but to appeal, encourage and urge.

Dick Shepherd was the Vicar of St Martin in the Fields. He came from a hugely privileged background because his father was Rector of All Saints in Windsor Great Park and Shepherd himself was born in the cloisters of the castle. Yet he developed an empathy with people that made him popular on the radio, partly because of all he had seen serving as a chaplain in World War One. He had a number of breakdowns and eventually married his nurse. From that fragility grew an understanding of faith and human nature that resulted in St Martin’s becoming a haven for the homeless during his time there. The Revd Dick Shepherd wanted, in the name of his Lord, to help folks loosen their burdens.

Little wonder then that when he died in 1937 the BBC announcer said it was as if the news of his passing made the temperature drop in Trafalgar Square.

Our calling is to appeal, encourage and urge and our prayer is that faith will be a joy, never a burden.

May it be so, in the name of the one who can make all our burdens lighter.

Amen.

*Ian Green Amersham 3rd November 2023*