

Today's Gospel is strong stuff about the Pharisees and scribes. But I would invite you to read it carefully. For a start, let's understand that this language is far from unusual in the ancient world, and it tends to be something that can be turned on like a tap. One of the things we've learned about Pharisees in recent years is that, even after guarding against romanticizing them, we've reason to believe that the best of them were admirable men, who faithfully practiced their religion, and honestly doubted the claim that the Messiah had come. If anyone wants to study this area of religious history, they should be encouraged; a good rabbi of the first century is an extremely saintly man.

Let me give you more of the same from roughly our period: we'll soon see that the way Matthew has Jesus speak about the opponents of Christianity is very much the way all opponents talked about each other back then. Among the philosophers, Dio Chrysostom said that Sophists were "ignorant, boastful, self-deceived, unlearned, evil-spirited, impious, untruthful, mindless, and shameless": he said they preached for the sake of gain and glory, and they were worth less than the monkeys in the zoo. Plutarch tells us the Epicureans were "arrogant and irreligious" and lived with prostitutes. Epictetus thought the Platonists were "intellectually dead and full of sophistries": and that the Epicureans said one thing and did another, and taught doctrines that were "bad, subversive of the state, destructive of the family, and unfit even for women".

Jews are no less extreme. Josephus the great historian drew the Zealots as "murderers, transgressors of the laws of God and Nature, impostors, madmen, hard-hearted wretches, bastards and scum, more wicked than Sodom, guilty of barbarity, avarice, impudent undertakings, wicked practices, impiety, tyranny over others, the greatest madness, and wild and brutish dispositions". The Pharisee author of the Psalms of Solomon says that the Sadducees are "profane, with hearts far from God, law-breakers, verbose and ostentatious": they lack self-control and were lustful after women: they seek to impress people and covet the property of others, hypocrites defrauding others by pretence.

They make the Priests of the Deanery look quite mild by comparison.

"But of course," I hear you say, "none of the above are Christians." Did you say Christians? Athenagoras reports that the early Christians were charged with "atheism, cannibalism, and sexual libertinism". Lucian says that Christians are "poor wretches who in their simplicity, fall victim to any cunning charlatan"; Pliny refers to Christians as "obstinate, full of mad folly, and dangerous". He thought the Christian faith "debased superstition". Minucius Felix, the biographer of the Emperor Augustus, says Christians are "reprobate, wicked, arrogant, irresponsible, unlawful, and desperate": they are "drawn from the lowest dregs of the world" and have a religion based on lust, because they worship genitals and asses' heads, with ritual centred on infanticide and cannibalism.

So did Jesus really say these terrible things about the Scribes and Pharisees? I strongly doubt it. Did he denounce corruption, pride, duplicity and selfishness? Most certainly he did. But by the time this Gospel was written, the Jewish leaders, in the disastrous years after the demolition of the Temple, were already locked in mortal struggle against the early Christian Church; and in that atmosphere of sectarian hatred, language like this becomes common coin. These men have been demonised, and some of their frightened deeds were indeed pretty hateful. It was inevitable that the Lord's denunciation of vice should cluster about the figures the Church most feared. Jesus obviously did have run-ins with the Pharisees: but we should not forget the history which intervened before Matthew wrote down this chapter.

If the Gospel, therefore, is tuning in to some feelings and judgments which postdate our Lord, how are we to read these verses tonight? Well, it's Lent, and these verses weren't saved by the Church to preserve catty remarks about opponents. We must hurry to read them *for ourselves*, and receive the judgment they carry on our own behalf. I think the clergy of the deanery will join me in accepting that it is hard to listen to the Gospel tonight without noticing that we are actually wearing longer tassels and broader stoles than anyone else here, and that we have undeniably taken the front seats, and that everyone else calls us *Father* in the most respectful fashion if we meet them in the market-place.

It's really hard for me to explain to you how we could set ourselves up quite so comprehensively to be blown out of the water at a station mass. So rather than embarking on a long theological self-justification, let me cut a corner and say that the clergy are indeed in the firing-line, and we have much to repent for. We let people call us by honorific titles, and we dress up in fancy costumes, knowing we're no better (if mostly no worse) than anybody else. What we do about that is partly in our hands. But what about you? Do you collaborate in this foolishness of ours? We ought to find a way of relating that is respectful of one another, but also free from nonsense and what we call "human respect". Give us clergy, please, the space to climb down gracefully from our pedestals: a plinth is a very uncomfortable place to live, and cramps our style beyond belief.

Secondly, let us learn to divest ourselves of pride and pomposity as a Church. We're living in a country which has largely rejected us, and is in danger of rejecting our Lord as well. We must look at ourselves long and hard, and ask ourselves whether anything in this torrent of abuse we've unfortunately heard tonight is really true of us. We must approach the world as Jesus did: humbly, in a spirit of selfless service; in the end, I am convinced that only holiness in the Church is going to turn the key and open the door for people to find the Lord. Holiness grows quietly in the hearts of humble people, not like a hot-house plant tended for hours each day.

Thirdly, let us show our faith in action as Isaiah tells us to. Those who won't listen to our theology should stand astonished at our love - for the poor and unloved, for the unlovable world. We have today - and remember it may not last much longer - such power for giving, for changing the world, for reaching those most in need. Let people see how ready we are to enter the Kingdom we proclaim: not by exalting ourselves, but by cheerfully taking the lowest place, because we know it is where the gate of heaven is found.