

Wheatley United Reformed Church  
 Sunday 5 November 2017 (Year A)  
 Micah 3.5-12; Psalm 43; I Thess.2.9-13; Matthew 23.1-12

What is religion for?

‘Remember, remember the fifth of November, gunpowder, treason and plot’. Many of us grew up keenly anticipating Guy Fawkes night. We made guys, put them in a wheelbarrow, went around collecting pennies for them, then lit bonfires and let off fireworks, the noisier the better. These days, Hallowe’en - on the face of it a more Christian celebration, as the eve of All Saints – has largely taken over. Except in the county town of East Sussex, Lewes, where bonfire night is celebrated to an extraordinary degree, ostensibly in commemoration of seventeen Protestant martyrs burnt there in the 1550s, during the reign of Queen Mary. The town has six bonfire societies and they process through the jam-packed streets in all kinds of costumes, carrying burning torches and seventeen burning crosses. Special trains are laid on from Brighton. When I lived on the south coast I used to go, but to tell you the truth, amidst the spectacle and the revelry I found it just a little sinister. Perhaps that’s because the Cliffe Bonfire Society, one of the largest, always burns an effigy of the Pope in 1605, Paul V, alongside Guy Fawkes and a contemporary politician – last year, unsurprisingly, Donald Trump. Until 1859 there was even a special service in the Book of Common Prayer ‘for the happy Deliverance of the King, and the Three Estates of the Realm, from the most Traiterous and Bloudy intended Massacre by Gun-Powder’.

We know only too well from history and from the state of our world today what deadly brews are cooked up when religion mixes with sectarianism or nationalism. We all need a sense of identity and belonging, but the more global the world becomes the more humans seem to want to assert the identity of their group over against others. Can we honestly say that the Protestant martyrs who died for their faith in the reign of Bloody Mary deserve to be remembered, while the Catholic martyrs of Elizabeth’s reign don’t? It’s taken us a long time even to begin to come to terms with our divided past. One of the most moving memorials in the University Church of St Mary’s in Oxford – a recent one – is to the Oxford martyrs of both faiths,

their names engraved on the same stone, together. We can and should value the freedoms which the Reformation and the Glorious Revolution brought to our nations, but we must also grieve for all the blood spilt in those tumultuous times.

All this leads me to wonder what religion is for, and when I hear the words of Jesus in Matthew today I find that he is asking the same kind of question. Is religion a form of social control, which enables those at the top of the tree to lay down the rules for how everyone is to behave, even if they sit light to these rules themselves? Is it meant to tell us what is right and entice us with an eternal reward if we follow its commandments, or threaten an eternity of hellfire if we don't? Does it close our minds by insisting that the literal sense of the words in whichever version of the Bible we read contains infallible truths which must be accepted, even if they conflict with the discoveries of science or common sense or the promptings of mercy and love? There are people who want to answer 'yes' to those questions, perhaps because it gives them some kind of certainty about what to think and do in a world which is increasingly complex and baffling.

So listen to Jesus on the attack. He has just silenced his opponents by sidestepping the traps they have set for him and setting a few of his own. Does he shed any light on what religion is for? He begins with withering criticism of the scribes and Pharisees, the professional theologians and the members of the movement devoted to applying the Jewish Law to every detail of life. They sit on Moses' seat, he says; that is, they interpret the Law originally given to Moses, probably from a special seat in the synagogue, like the bishop's chair – 'cathedra' – in a cathedral. That's not in itself a criticism. 'Do whatever they teach you and follow it', he says, rather surprisingly, before adding 'but do not do as they do, for they do not practise what they teach'. Ouch. Which of us does? My mind went back to the epitaph composed for King Charles II by one of the greatest libertines of his age, the Earl of Rochester, who died of venereal disease at the age of thirty-three and is said to have had a deathbed conversion to Anglicanism:

Here lies our sovereign Lord, the King,  
whose words no man relies on,  
who never said a foolish thing,  
nor ever did a wise one.

I think we all know how much easier it is to say the right and wise thing than to do it. So the first point Jesus makes is that in religious practise the two belong together. Don't tell other people what to do and then fail to do it yourself. And especially, Jesus continues, don't make life hard for other people and never lift a finger to help. What is he thinking of here? The scribes and Pharisees, he says, place heavy burdens on people's shoulders and leave them to it. He may even be making a veiled but powerful criticism: in Exodus 1 we read of how the Egyptian taskmasters afflicted the children of Israel with burdens – as if their own teachers and leaders were acting as their oppressors had of old. By contrast, as he says earlier in Matthew, 'My yoke is easy and my burden light'. Easy and light: that's probably not how we think of religion; yet that is what Jesus suggests.

Next he turns to their love of outward show and their wanting their deeds to be seen by others. In Mark's version of this passage he goes further – he accuses the scribes (but not the Pharisees) of devouring widows' houses and saying long prayers for the sake of appearance. As he watches rich people very visibly putting large amounts of money into the treasury, he notices a poor widow giving two little copper coins, nothing at all. And yet, he says, she has put in more than everyone else, because it is all that she had. A rebuke to us all, surely. Which of us doesn't enjoy dressing up and being seen and admired? Which of us doesn't want to be thought of as generous? But it's no good feeling a glow of satisfaction as Jesus rips into those who sit at top table and who are respected for the position they occupy in society. That's self-righteousness, and if there's one thing Christians ought to know it is that self-righteousness is a spiritual dead end. Whenever I have to dress in ceremonial robes connected with some duty or other in Oxford University, I love it. I get a real kick out of the tourists gawping or taking photos as I swan around. And I have to keep telling myself, if only they knew; if only they knew that underneath all the finery we are ordinary people with the same problems, the same insecurities, the same needs. It's fine to put on a good show; but if we start to trust in outward appearances we are in serious spiritual trouble.

The same goes, of course, for religious vestments. Jesus mentions two: phylacteries, which are little leather boxes or cases containing a text from the Hebrew

Bible, which you wear on your forehead and bind round your arm; and fringes, which adorn prayer robes. Orthodox Jews still wear them. The point, though, is not the wearing of them but making them very conspicuous so that people notice them and think how religious you are. Many Christian clergy wear vestments, in my case usually a cassock alb and seasonal stole. They're important to me not, I hope, because I want to show off but because they remind me and perhaps help you to understand that ministers do not conduct worship because they like to be noticed, but because they are representative of an office, the ordained ministry of Word and Sacraments in our tradition. They are a uniform, like a policeman's or a nurse's. Jesus also criticizes the scribes and Pharisees for loving to be called rabbi and tells his hearers that they are to call no one a teacher or a father on earth. Some of you know that I have a Spanish friend, an Anglican priest, who often calls me 'rabbi', not entirely seriously, because of my Jewish ancestry. On the other hand, when I was first ordained and wore a clerical collar more often than now, I was often approached in pubs by gentlemen from an island off the west coast of Great Britain who would call me 'Father' and then ask for a pint or some money. So I stopped.

There's a more serious point, though. Quite a few people here are or have been teachers of one kind or another. If you think that you know it all and that your pupils are there to drink in the pearls of wisdom that fall from your lips you've got it wrong; and more so when it comes to the life of faith, where we are all students, learners of Jesus, however short or long we've been with him on the road and whatever position we occupy in the life of the church. When it comes to fathers, Jesus is probably thinking of the 'Fathers' of the Jewish faith, the Patriarchs, like Abraham. You can hear an echo of that in John's Gospel, when in chapter 8 he is arguing with those who claim that they are right because Abraham is their father and who is this provincial upstart to call into question their chosen status. Don't rely on your ancestry, Jesus is telling them, to assert your moral and spiritual superiority.

I don't know about you, but I warm to the words of Jesus that, even if we are teachers, we are all students. It's forty-six years since I was ordained and I can honestly say that I am still very much a learner when it comes to his way, and always will be. If we place our trust in our position, our qualifications, and worse still any

power we exercise, we will always let ourselves and, more importantly, others down. ‘The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.’ That complete reversal of how we imagine things are is hard to understand, let alone practise. But it helps for us to be reminded that for Christians their first identity and the place where they first and best belong is in Christ. Not only does loyalty to Christ trump our local and national identities, it is the source of wisdom and grace for the healing of our world’s wounds. There is a proper pride in self and a proper love of our families and communities, to be sure, but never to the exclusion or demeaning of others. For the greatest treasure on which we draw in order to find peace, build justice and grow in love, is Christ himself. From him we learn the paradoxical and necessary lessons of true greatness as humility and true power as service; and most of all, of love stronger even than death. It is in him that we are bound together, so that our separate identities are no longer barriers between us but become in his service gifts which enrich us all.