

MATTHEW 23:1-12  
HEARING AND SEEING THE GOSPEL

This week sees the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. It is 500 years since Martin Luther pinned his 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenburg to begin the process of reforming the church. This created a movement that swept across Western Europe to change the church forever. Luther wanted to change the Catholic church from within, but eventually he was pushed out and so began the protestant reformation that was to lead to the work of men like John Calvin and John Knox, and our church in Scotland finds its heritage and history in the ministry of these men. Luther had begun to read his bible and what he saw there came into conflict with what he saw in the life of his church; he wanted to appeal to the pope to make changes in the church, in its leadership, in its people, but the church authorities would not listen!

Luther discovered that "Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that a man would stake his life on it a thousand times" (Preface to *Romans* p.xvii) The gospel is something that God does in us and we are changed by the grace of God rather than our own efforts. There were three Latin principles that came to be watchwords of the church: *Sola gratia* (by grace alone); *Sola Scriptura* (the Bible is the only authority) and *Sola Deo Gloria* (to God alone belongs the glory). This discovery about the gospel and these three principles set a fire burning across Europe, and the continent and its churches were never to be the same again. By 1560, the reformation came to Scotland and the protestant church, of which we are heir, was born.

What Luther saw was church that on the outside didn't match with what the church should be on the inside. The gospel said one thing, but the church was saying and doing something different and the people were not hearing or seeing the gospel of grace that he had rediscovered. This is a constant tension for us as Christians: how does our lifestyle match our profession of faith? We profess faith in Jesus and as part of that, we declare that Jesus is Lord. But we make mistakes and don't always live up to that profession. Some years ago, when the church did research into why people don't come to church, there was a whole section called "*It's the church that puts me off*"; some said that Christianity doesn't seem very Christian, or that Christians didn't live up to their ideals, Christians are constantly fighting with each other and so on. What they saw of church didn't seem to match with our profession of loyalty to Jesus!

There is nothing new in this; this is exactly the point that Jesus is making in our reading today. He has been in conversation with the Pharisees about all sorts of questions of authority and leadership; now He speaks to the crowds and His disciples about the Pharisees. To begin with, it sounds fine: "*The teachers...*" (*Matthew 23:2f*) Maybe it seems strange that He should be telling people to listen to them, but we listen for God's word wherever we find it and these men are teachers of the Bible! They sit in "Moses' seat"! But "*Do not...*" (*Matthew 23:3f*) They are different on the outside from the inside; outside they appear to be godly people, but inside they are quite different. They are callous of others, uncaring; they tell you what to do, but they don't do it themselves; they don't help you to know God. Someone has said that they "multiplied the number of ways in which a man may offend God but failed in helping him to please God." (Garland)

On top of that, they are basically selfish and self-centred men. They love to show off. Phylacteries were the little boxes that the Jews wore on their foreheads with a Bible text inside; they love to have great big phylacteries so that everyone can see that they are holy men. It is the same with their gowns; it is the same with their love of the best seats and prominent places. They love to be seen and to show off, but it is not gospel that is seen; it is these men that are seen, as they show off to the world how important they think they are. They love titles and honours; they love people to bow as they pass. It is all show on the outside.

Jesus turns things upside down: "*The greatest...*" (*Matthew 23:11f*) There are two qualities that are to shape kind of people we are. First of all, we are to serve – this is a quite different way of thinking because the focus of the servant is always on someone else. How can we serve God? How can we serve one another? The focus is on someone else, either on doing what God wants of us, or doing what someone else needs us to do. We are to serve. Secondly, there is humility – to count others as more important than ourselves, not putting ourselves first. It is a quite different attitude and an attitude of which Jesus Himself was a prime example, the glorious Son of God humbling Himself to die on a cross because that was what we needed. These are upside-down attitudes in Jesus' world; these are upside-down attitudes in our world. Christians need to serve and be humble.

Paul paints a hugely different picture of leadership when he writes to the Christians in Thessalonica. He's writing about way he and perhaps Silas and Timothy treated people when they arrived in their town. He talks about them as being like a loving mother and as a father caring for their children; he writes about people who shared not only gospel truth, but shared their lives with others and were delighted to share themselves. He writes about Christian leaders who were ready to encourage, comfort, and urge on the people they met, their fellow-Christians, in their journey of faith, people who worked night and day so that they weren't a burden to others, not needing to depend on them for support. Here are church leaders ready to be servants to others, being humble, full of grace in the kind of people they were and ready to serve Jesus and serve others. Not only did the Christians in Thessalonica hear the gospel from Paul and his friends, but they saw the gospel in them at the same time.

When I was a teenager and a bit lost, looking for direction in life, I met a man who happened to be the minister of the church that I grew up in. He came to be our minister and for the first time I really heard the gospel and the Bible being taught and discussed. At the same time, I saw someone who lived his life for Jesus and I was impressed by the quality of his life and the way he conducted himself. It was what I heard and what I saw that led me to say "yes" to Jesus in my own voice and set me out on the journey of faith and later into ministry. I heard the gospel and I saw the gospel and the two came together to lead me to Jesus and to faith. It is such an important coming together.

It is a huge challenge for us to share our faith with other people. None of us finds it easy to speak about what we hold dear. Yet, how will people hear if we don't tell them? There is an obligation on us to speak about our faith when opportunities arise; we need courage to take these opportunities and wisdom to know what to say so that people hear about Jesus in ways that draw them in.

People also need to see Jesus in us. We might think that is an even greater challenge, that people should look at us and see Jesus, but that too is challenge we face. These two simple qualities help us see what that means: service and humility, that we are willing to serve Jesus and other people, to do what Jesus wants and to help people in whatever way they need; and to do all of that with humility, looking to serve for service sake, rather than for any reward we might be after, humbly caring for needs of others. These two qualities will allow people to see gospel in us; these two qualities are the fruit of the grace of God in us and when people see us serve and be humble then they see the grace of God in us and are drawn that little bit closer to Jesus. They may not know it, but they see something of the gospel in us. The world needs to hear the gospel from us and needs to see the gospel in us.

Tatiana Goricheva lived in the Soviet Union in the 1980's, a Christian who was forced to flee to the West because of her faith and her Christian activity. She wrote a book called *Talking about God is dangerous* and when I picked it up to read it I expected a story about persecution and how dangerous it was to be a Christian in the Soviet Union. It is that, but the title doesn't refer to that. The title refers to her experience of Christianity in the West. She writes about watching a religious broadcast in Germany and seeing a self-satisfied preacher talk about love. "The way in which he presented himself excluded any possibility of a sermon...faceless..." She concludes that "Each word must be a sacrifice – filled to the brim with authenticity."

The Pharisees didn't practice what they preached; they were unwilling to do what they set out for others to do; they loved to show off; they revelled in big titles and in receiving respect; they saw ministry as a way to gain recognition. Jesus spoke of telling people about God, and He spoke of showing people God: we tell the story of Jesus so that people hear the gospel; let our lives be full of service and humility so that people see the gospel in us; let us live authentic lives, as real people, people the same inside and out; we'll never be perfect, but here's our target! Who is our role model? Jesus Himself!