Cup of Sincerity

Matt 23:25-32

St Francis 22nd Feb 2015

Recently I went away for my friend’s Steve’s 40th birthday, with another friend, Jeff. We went to Swindon, of all places, which is more of a concrete jungle than Croydon. I don’t know why! Anyway, we decided to head out to the countryside to a beautiful spot called the Wessex Downs. Jeff was driving, but he didn’t have a map or a satnav. Steve and I both had brand new smartphones – me a Sony Xperia Z1 and he had a iphone 6 plus with a monster screen, both with satnav capability. So Steve said no problem, my iphone 6+ will get us there using apple maps; no I said my phone’s got google maps, that’s better. I was chuffed because he lost his signal and I didn’t. But what I didn’t realise was that my phone was set to cycling directions and you can guess what happened We literally ended up in a field of crops, hoping the farmer wouldn’t notice us! We laughed about that all day.

A silly competition about who had the best phone nearly ended in disaster! In the 18th Century the French philosopher Rousseau drew a connection between competition in the public sphere and hypocrisy. Competition, he argues, causes people to start playing roles to impress other people rather than be true to themselves. For example

The best way to cultivate a reputation for fairness is to really be fair. But since it is much harder to *be* fair than to *seem* fair, and since laziness is built deep into human nature,[[12]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hypocrisy#cite_note-12) humans more often choose appearance over reality.

Jesus found the same 2000 years ago.

He is brutal in his criticism of the Pharisees and teachers of the law:

**5**‘Everything they do is done for people to see: they make their phylacteries[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=mat+23&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-23924a)]wide and the tassels on their garments long; **6**they love the place of honour at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; **7**they love to be greeted with respect in the market-places and to be called “Rabbi” by others.

Yet their hearts are rotten, like a cup which is beautiful and shiny on the outside but is full of the foul smelling liquid. He even goes as far as to say they are whitewashed tombs, pure and pristine on the outside but full of death within.

In our exploration of cups in the Bible, this is the cup of hypocrisy, the cup of phoney, fraud, two-faced characters! A cup none of us want to be compared to, but no doubt one which we all drink of from time to time. It is a condition which easily afflicts the church, for as we strive to be holy the temptation is always to take shortcuts and settle for the appearance of being holy instead.

Many years ago when I was single, I went round for a meal at my friend’s house with his family. We had a lovely meal and then my friend, Bob, got up to do the washing up. We all thought, what a servant-hearted well domesticated man he is! That was until his teenage son piped up, “Dad why do you only wash up when we have guests round”. Oh dear, his bubble burst big time.

In the old days, statues were sculpted from marble by skilled craftsman. Occasionally the sculpting process would reveal a crack in the marble and dishonest craftsmen would use wax to fill the crack in to hide the imperfection. The only trouble was that when the hot sun came out, the wax would melt and the crack would be revealed. But some craftsmen refused to do this and their work was labelled sincere. The Latin for wax is cera, and the latin for without is sine. Sincere = without wax!

What is the opposite of hypocrisy? It is sincerity. To be without wax. To be truthful, to be honest. That means being truthful with ourselves and our motives.

Hypocrisy is a greek word , a combination of  the Greek prefix *hypo-*, meaning "under", and the verb *krinein*, meaning "to sift or decide". Thus hypocrisy is a deficiency in the ability to sift or decide. In our context it means self-deception or self-ignorance. The pompous teachers of the law, parading around have deluded themselves that they are holiest people around but Jesus says, no you’re not, you are full of greed and self-indulgence.

So the first thing we can do to guard against the cup of hypocrisy is to be truthful.

Are we aware of our limitations and our frailties or are we blind to our weaknesses?

I’m our families are very good at pointing these things out to us!

Lent is a good season to be thinking of these things, as we have been marked with ashes on Wednesday, we are reminded of both our mortality and our sinfulness. On the other hand it is important for us not to identify ourselves with our brokenness and sin. We are more than that and God gives us his grace so that we can change and move forward. When the woman was caught in adultery what did Jesus say? Did he say thank you for honesty and now go and live an authentic life as a sex worker! No, he said, I don’t condemn you now go and sin no more. Jesus wants us to be honest, but also to change!

My second point connects with where I started. Competition. The Pharisees lived in a competitive world where having big phylacteries and long tassels had got to mean that you were more holy, more learned, and more pious. Jesus dared say the obvious: how ridiculous!

Competition is good for the premier league or for the Olympics, but deeply corrosive in our spiritual lives. Competition leads to shortcuts, competition leads to inauthenticity, competition leads to appearances triumphing over substance. Unfortunately, it still happens in the church. There are some vicars that try engineer themselves into being “noticed”, rather than letting their actions do the talking. I hope no one is fooled by it!

The disciples competed with one another to see who could sit at Jesus left and right hand. Jesus dismissed it and said

**38**‘You don’t know what you are asking,’ Jesus said. ‘Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with?’

In other words, Jesus is drawing them away from appearances of prestige and power to the reality of their destiny – a cup not of pretence and hypocrisy, but of service, of giving to others without reward or notice. Jesus is saying don’t look at others and what they are doing but look to yourselves and to God. What is God calling you to do? Who has he given you to help and influence? Are you willing to trade your craving for power for the common good?

It’s a strong message that Jesus brings to us. The cup of hypocrisy is a very very tempting drinking vessel. But it leads to a dead end if we aren’t careful.

In the movie Indiana Jones and the last Crusade both Jones and his arch enemy are trying to be the first to find and drink from the Holy Grail – allegedly the cup that Jesus drank from. The baddie gets to the destination first and finds a vast array of beautiful jewel encrusted chalices. The old knight, guarding the hoard, urges him to choose wisely. He picks out the most lavish one, takes a sip only to find it is poison, and immediately falls down dead. Indiana Jones searches the trove of cup and eventually finds the plainest, earthenware cup. He drinks from it – it is indeed the Holy Grail!

How we to avoid the cup of hypocrisy?

We are to be honest and truthful even when the cracks are there for all to see.

Secondly there is no place for power seeking in the Christian life, with its associated trappings, but instead loving service and integrity.

Amen.