

Swallowing Camels (Matthew 23: 1-13, 23-24, 37-39)

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Homo religiosus – the religious human being – is a dangerous creature. I'm not sure if that was taken for granted in Jesus' day. Perhaps, when he directed his excoriating series of 'woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!', it came as a shock to them and to the crowds who heard it. In our context, though, this kind of critique is a commonplace of secular, humanist discourse. More than two-thirds of Australians in a recent poll said they believe religion does more harm in the world than good. Even for those of us who are hanging in with the practice of Christian faith and community, it can be tempting to agree.

For me, as I know for many of you, the most recent challenge has been the behaviour of some of our religious leaders and representatives in the context of the survey on marriage equality, which has so painfully impacted Australia's LGBTQI community. When I think, among other things, of the Anglican Church of Sydney contributing \$1 million dollars towards the fear-mongering of the 'no' campaign, I can't think of a better example of those who 'tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others'. Talk about 'swallowing a camel'! And I am so sorry, particularly to those of you here who have been personally wounded and traumatized by this whole process.

What is it about being 'religious' that can be so problematic – apparently, so humanly and ethically corrupting? How is it that the desire to love and honour God can become so painfully distorting and damaging of human life?

In this part of Matthew's gospel, Jesus directs seven 'woes' to the religious leaders in Jerusalem. He accuses them of being obsessed with their own honour, 'doing all their deeds to be seen by others', and of the kind of zeal which not only gets in the way of those who would otherwise be drawn to God but cultivates even more obnoxiously zealous converts. He accuses them of being obsessed with fulfilling

the letter of the law but missing entirely its spirit, of fixating on external observance, while neglecting the real truth of their lives: 'you are like whitewashed tombs', he says, 'which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth' (Matt. 23:27). You can't get a better description of someone refusing their inner work than that! And finally, he accuses them of unwarranted complacency and self-righteousness. You're so convinced, he says, that 'if [you] had lived in the days of [your] ancestors, [you] would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets' (Matt 23:30), and yet you're seemingly totally oblivious to your complicity in just this kind of violence. After all, what are you about to do to me?

It's a devastating catalogue of how badly we religious folk can go wrong. And maybe the root cause is the profound vulnerability to corruption of our desire for God. It's that desire which leads us to care about being good and living well; which inspires us to give ourselves whole-heartedly to what we think God wants. But it's also what can lead us to become petty-minded, over-scrupulous rule-followers, to compare our righteousness compulsively with that of others, to ramp up our devotional intensity all the while being terrified to look inside and acknowledge what's still unresolved or doubting or shameful within us. After all, if we want to remain part of the community of the 'saved', the 'found', the 'chosen' then the last thing we need is for our identity as 'good' people to blow up in our faces or be revealed as a sham. So we pretend. We suppress ourselves and others. We become hypocrites.

How is it possible to avoid these distortions of religious life? Jesus' solution to the conundrum seems at first glance rather lame. He appears to suggest that the way to guard against it is to avoid the use of certain titles. You are not to be called rabbi, or 'father' or 'instructors'. Some have focused on a literal reading of this text – hence the early Protestant reaction to the Catholic use of 'Father', for example – they banned it. Ironic – isn't it – how a passage about the dangers of legalism gives rise to another rule?

I suspect Jesus realises perfectly well that the mere refusal of honorifics doesn't, by itself, deal with the underlying issue. We all know that plain Mr Pastor can be just as oppressively sanctimonious as any Father Brown. So, it's what Jesus goes on to say that seems critical – his insistence on humility, on the willingness to be with one another in a certain way: 'The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted' (23:11-12). Of course, this is complex too. The religious ego can corrupt pretty much anything – and an oppressive feature of some Christian contexts is the prevalence of a certain pious 'umbleness and competitive, martyr-ish 'servanthood'. Here, the form taken by spiritual rivalry may have changed but its underlying dynamics remain firmly in place. We're still trying to 'perform', to get something right.

But true humility is different, and cannot be co-opted in this way. It involves, to begin, the willingness to look at, and then to own and accept yourself – warts and all, with all that remains a work in progress, all the default settings and reactivity we wish were otherwise. It involves letting ourselves be naked before God and discover ourselves loved, not despite our imperfection but in and through it. And by some grace, as this happens, we find ourselves slowly liberated from the habit of comparing ourselves, the need to make ourselves feel better by putting someone else (or ourselves) down. Jesus' direction to give up titles is essentially to do with the willingness simply to be alongside each another, all vulnerable and accountable before the One who loves us equally, and who is no form of rivalry or competition with us. 'You are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father – the one in heaven' (23: 8-9).

Can you feel how this creates some space, space to be? To be loved? And, to let others be, all of us gathered together by God 'as a hen gathers her brood under her wings' (23:37)? We chickens might still disagree about how to be well together – this vision doesn't take away what Rowan Williams has called 'the labour of ethics'. But to be recipients of this divine inclusivity and invitation automatically lessens our

natural human compulsion to judge others without mercy or to set ourselves apart from them in our self-certain rectitude.

And yet – doesn't Jesus judge the scribes and Pharisees? And didn't I do the same with the Sydney diocese? Isn't there some performative contradiction here?

Well, it's true we're in an area of moral and spiritual danger – and (speaking for myself) I'm very aware of my tendency to become energetically self-righteous when I compare myself with those dreadful religious people who don't think like me ... and of how ultimately un-edifying that is. Yet having said that, I do believe some kind of judgement still needs to be made.

What seems to get Jesus riled more than anything else, is when he encounters religious leaders who block access to the love of God, who tell people they're ineligible, who diminish others' life and life prospects while imagining they're doing God's will. Jesus intimates that in the background is *their* tragic failure truly to believe in and receive God's love – 'you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves'. And he laments over Jerusalem, 'how often I have desired to gather you ... and you were not willing'. The terrible corollary of this refusal, though, is that 'when others are going in, you stop them' – and this is not something about which Jesus will be silent.

Being naked before God, being loved by God has content – it changes us. And we *can* tell the difference between a religious rule follower who claims, zealously and self-righteously, to speak *for* God, and someone who is actually in the process of being transformed *by* God (usually by way of their wounds) into greater wholeness, generosity, tenderness and forbearing. The Scriptures describe this as the distinction between the hard-hearted and the broken-hearted, between burnt offerings and mercy. And they're clear about which of these *God* desires, which of these truly does proclaim God's holy name. *Homo religiosus* is a dangerous creature. In fear and trembling, then, let us offer our hearts to be known and pray that by grace we grow in authentic service and liberation of others, bearers of *God's* love and truth in our world.