

Beware the Scribes (Mark 12: 38-44)*Pentecost XXV*

© Sarah Bachelard

My brother Michael is a journalist. A few years ago, I was at the Sydney Writer's Festival where he was speaking, and in the evening he took me to a party with his fellow authors. It was a gathering of urbane, intellectually sophisticated literati. He introduced me as his sister, and then (as only a brother can) he lobbed his little social grenade – 'she's a priest', he said. There was the usual mixture of surprise and slight awkwardness as those around me cast their minds back to see if they'd sworn or blasphemed since I'd been standing there.

But then – something less usual happened. A woman – I later found out she worked in advertising – lit into me. 'How can you?', she said. 'How can you bear to be in the *church*?' She was almost apoplectic with outrage about Christianity – which she accused of systematically denigrating women (I thought that was a bit rich, coming from an advertising executive), of being judgmental, arrogant and so self-righteous it thinks it's got the right to tell everyone else how to live. 'What are you *thinking*?' she cried.

Well – this is the most direct attack on my involvement with the church I've ever experienced, but it put on loud speaker what we know is out there. Many of our contemporaries find Christianity and the church an anachronism, at best irrelevant and dying away and at worst actively damaging and corrosive of the common good. I have another brother who tells me that when he mentions my being a Christian to people in his circle, they assume I'm either very conservative or not very bright. In our day, there's no shortage of critics of religion – and neither, it must be said, is there any shortage of religion in need of criticism. As we all know, much of the ire that's directed at the church and at religion in general is all too well-deserved. In

Australia, the current controversy over so called 'religious freedom' and the license to discriminate against LGBTQI students and staff in Christian schools is just the most recent case in point.

But here's the encouraging thing. Jesus was a critic of religion too. As with the prophets of Israel before him, you might even say there's a kind of anti-religious sentiment in Jesus. And it seems to me that his critique of corrupt religious culture shows us what it means to be properly self-critical as Christians, while at the same making it possible (despite everything) to affirm the gift and call of our tradition. Over the next three weeks, I want to explore what I'm calling 'the un-religion of Jesus' and its significance for our practice of faith. Tonight we begin with his critique of hypocrisy. There's an obvious and a not so obvious dimension to this issue.

We'll start with the obvious. 'Beware of the scribes', Jesus said. They like to walk around in long robes, and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets [not unlike certain archbishops and school principals]; they pray long and loud 'for the sake of appearance', yet all the while they pick on the most vulnerable, 'devouring widows' houses'. Here Jesus condemns the discrepancy between word and deed, between espoused and enacted values, between outward presentation and the inward condition of the heart. Of course, it's not just religious folk who are prone to this kind of discrepancy. Think of bankers professing the value of customer service while defrauding even the dead; or of politicians cracking down on the entitlements of the unemployed while falsifying their travel claims. But given the magnitude of what religious people claim to represent and the moral authority they often wield, hypocrisy here is particularly galling – says Jesus, 'they will receive the greater condemnation'.

Fair enough. Yet the temptation at this point is to focus our attention solely on 'them' – those wicked 'others' who don't practise what they preach and who then bring the rest of us nice Christians into disrepute. But if we get stuck here, we miss the less obvious forms of hypocrisy in which many more of us are implicated,

and with which Jesus was also deeply concerned. This isn't so easy to get at, but let me start by giving an example of what I mean.

Some time ago, I attended a meeting at what was then my local parish – a meeting of the pastoral care committee. The agenda was how to ensure that people felt welcomed to the church, how to ensure that new people stayed. I felt tired immediately. At one level, the concern expressed was genuinely for the people – had they been offered hospitality? Did they feel accepted, cared for? Clearly important concerns. At another level, though, I discerned something else driving the meeting's agenda. Something like: are we being *seen* as welcoming? Are we living up to our self-image as inclusive, caring and warm-hearted? There was an implicit self-consciousness about the conversation, a concern to shore up our own virtue.

Rowan Williams has pointed out that in the gospels the notion 'hypocrite' doesn't necessarily imply insincerity. The Greek word means simply 'actor' – and actors are those who 'perform' themselves, who seek to construct and live up to a chosen way of being.¹ And I think that's what I was sensing at this parish meeting. It's a subtle issue, but profoundly significant. Because it seems to me that hypocrisy in this sense affects the culture of the church to an enormous degree. Think of all that trying to be good, all that trying to love one another, that jovial bonhomie, even all that trying to 'be'. I've certainly been there. Years ago, an exasperated friend told me I was *doing* being. And she was right. Though I thought I was sincere, I was in this sense a hypocrite – that is, I was *performing* my life, keeping one eye on my progress, trying to *will* myself whole.

And I wonder if this is part of what Jesus observed as he watched people putting money in the Temple treasury? Some were 'performing' their generosity – rich people giving large sums, presenting themselves well before God and their neighbours; but the poor widow simply was generous, giving of herself without remainder, 'all she had to live on'.

¹ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p.260.

Jesus wants to teach us that true godliness is not about *performance* – ‘practising our piety before others’ or even before ourselves. It’s about the transformation of our whole way of being, our feelings, thoughts, imaginings. Williams says: ‘To be converted to the faith does not mean simply acquiring a new set of beliefs [or, we might add, adopting a new set of behaviours]. It’s about ‘becoming a new person’. And beyond self-righteous moralism, self-conscious religiosity, Jesus is constantly seeking to draw us into this possibility of a new humanity – free, fulfilled, real, unafraid. This is the gift he would have us know for ourselves and be capable of communicating to our world.

So how do we come to know this experience and to live from it? How do we cease being try-hard converts, hypocrites? Not by becoming ever more pious or rigid or conforming. Not by ramping up the religious rules and defining our goodness over against others’ supposed badness. We cease being hypocrites by daring simply to come as we are before God, humble, naked, available. We let go our efforts to justify ourselves, to make ourselves good, and we wait on grace. In this process the contemplative disciplines are essential – being present, being with ourselves, growing in awareness of our self-deceptions and illusions, acknowledging our brokenness, dividedness and need. And paradoxically, this way of poverty and helplessness is the way of liberation and reconciliation – it’s how our practice of faith makes of us a gift to others.

I think our critics are often right to sniff in much of Christian life the odour of hypocrisy. Not only because of headline instances of flagrant dishonesty, but because of the even more pervasive tendency among Christian communities to try to earn or grasp or fake what can only be received as gift. We know we’re doing it when we feel ourselves oppressed, and when we find ourselves oppressing others. But this doesn’t mean our faith is a crock. It just means we’re still learning what it means to inhabit the life Jesus came to share.