

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Advent 2/A

9<sup>th</sup> December 2007

Isaiah 2.1-5

Matt.3.36 – 44

### **Hypocrisy**

Hypocrisy – we all know how hated it is. We all know how hard the news media can be on it, when they sniff it out. We all know that ‘hypocrite’ is the last thing we’d want anyone to call us.

And we all know how often that term is aimed at religious people.

The word didn’t occur in our Gospel reading today – but the thought was there, with its full measure of anger: ‘When John saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for Baptism he said to them ‘You brood of vipers!...’ The Baptist, I think, had a sharper turn of phrase even than some tabloid journalists!

This is how we tend to see John – the hellfire preacher who prophesied not only the imminent kingdom, but also the imminent judgement. The fierce man, the wild man, the uncomfortable man from the desert who saw through people and cut them down to size; who didn’t care whom he offended; who put the sins of kings and priests on parade in front of the crowds who flocked to hear him speak... But he didn’t let anyone get away with titillation or complacency – the message was the same for everyone – repent!

It’s tempting to contrast John with Jesus one harsh, the other loving; one shouting stridently, the other persuading with gentle wisdom.

But it’s a false contrast. Jesus came eating and drinking, to be sure, where John had fasted and dressed in camel’s hair; Jesus came healing the blind and deaf, the leper and the lame -these were the signs of his Messiahship of which he sent word to John in prison. In these ways Jesus was something different, something much more than John. But in regard to identifying hypocrisy and condemning it, Jesus just carried right on where John had left off.

And, like John, Jesus particularly excoriated hypocrisy in the most religious people. Where John had called them a ‘brood

of vipers', Christ called them 'you whitewashed tombs!' You can't get much stronger than that.

If our secular neighbours look at religious people today and suspect us of hypocrisy, - are they on to something? Was it a sin peculiar to the Pharisees and Sadducees in the First Century, or is it a constant temptation and failing among believers of every age and faith? Even among followers of Christ himself?

Let's look at some aspects of hypocrisy.

First there's its simple face: the hypocrisy which says one thing and does completely the opposite.

Jesus calls for purity of heart; straightforwardness, the single eye. (Matt.58, 6.23). He warns of the hypocrisy he sees in the religious teachers: 'do what they teach', he says, 'but not what they do, for they do not practise what they teach'. (Matt.23.3)

On this simple assessment of hypocrisy, we're all bound to fail, no doubt. For we all fall short of our best intentions. And those of us who teach know the gap there can too easily be between the message and the deed. But how scandalous it is when no attempt is made to mend this gap, or when pretence is made that the gap isn't there in an

authority figure's life. This is what leads to hardening of hearts and entrenched sinfulness. This is the route to real hypocrisy - secrecy, pretence, and collusion with sin in our lives.

And collusion with sin so often leads, in religious people, to another nasty aspect of hypocrisy - justifying to ourselves our own evil, by religious argument. Jesus identified that in the Pharisees of his own day - the ones who supposedly dedicated their goods to God (whilst enjoying the fruit of them) and then said, 'O dear! There's nothing left to give to my dear old parents to support them in their dotage. It's all devoted to religious purposes! What a pity!' (Mark 7.11) That seems to us an almost comic example of casuistic hypocrisy - but other, even nastier things have been religiously justified over the ages: domestic violence and other abuses which have been identified with the father and husband's proper practice of authority in the home, for example; violence and theft committed against aboriginal peoples, in the name of the spread of Christian civilisation - and so forth. And there may be seemingly little things, too, which cumulatively have a huge effect - for example, people who want to remain big fish in the little pond of their local church, who insist emphatically on everything being done *properly* - 'to the glory of God' as they would say - but who

thereby cut other people out, keep their own control, and impede changes necessary for the kingdom's growth.

This kind of hypocrisy feeds upon religion – but stifles faith.

And then there's the kind of religious hypocrisy that comes out when people want to look more spiritual than they really are: Jesus saw it in the Pharisees who prayed at street corners, and let people know when they were fasting (Matt.6.5ff. and 16ff.). Paul identified it in Peter's behaviour – but with a particular twist, in that Peter was reverting to the pieties of his Jewish past when he gave up sharing meals with Gentiles, because he wanted to impress members of the Jerusalem Church. Paul laid into the hypocrisy of that at a public meeting, as he tells us in the second chapter of Galatians – not only was Peter being inconsistent: he was undermining the wonderful new discovery that he'd previously made, that Jew and Gentile were all one in Christ Jesus.

It's easy in a church community to want to fit in – to do things or say things you're not really convinced about, but which you think will look good to others. The worst harm of it comes when making yourself look good involves making others look bad, or making them feel marginalised and

inadequate. Religion is never so nasty as when it becomes the means by which people climb up a pecking-order.

And this leads to another aspect of hypocrisy, which may be a special temptation to religious people; the temptation to judge others. Jesus called this hypocrisy outright, when he conjured up that comic image of the man with a beam in his own eye trying to remove the speck from someone else's. It's such a striking image – we should have it before us as a warning at all times. But we don't. Because passing judgement on others seems to be such a basic human impulse; and when we've got the materials of religion to build into our judgement – well, that only adds to the fun!

Hypocrisy ! Hypocrisy! What a snare it is for the religious – for you and me as much as for the Pharisee and Sadducee. What good disguises it may wear, when it creeps into our lives and actions; what damage it can do to our real mission of love for God and neighbour.

But perhaps hypocrisy – unpleasant as it is in religious people – isn't only, or even mainly, our preserve. There can be a good deal of hypocrisy in the unbelieving world's finger-pointing at the church. Certainly, our sins are as scarlet – but making banner headlines of them in the red-tops may, perhaps, be a form of displacement therapy for

the general public, helping them avoid thinking about their own faults.

I once saw a rather splendid wayside pulpit, which I think said this rather neatly. This is how it read:  
'THIS CHURCH IS FULL OF HYPOCRITES – come and join us'.

Yes – hypocrisy is horrible. It's also very insidious in its various aspects. And religious hypocrisy rightly seems most poisonous in people's eyes. But Christianity doesn't just provide lots of material for hypocrisy to work with – it also provides the antidote to hypocrisy (if only we'll only swallow it) A regular pattern (at the beginning of each public service, for example) of reflection on our sin and asking for forgiveness. And some wonderful prayers which acknowledge our own capacity for self-deceit, and help us bring it humbly to God. Some words I treasure very much in this respect are from Psalm 19: 'Who can tell how often he offends?: O cleanse me from my secret faults. Keep your servant also from presumptuous sins, lest they get dominion over me.' (vv.12,13)

We have a way of coming to God, bringing to him even the evil we haven't yet detected in ourselves. We do this again and again whenever we say the Lord's prayer – 'lead us not

into temptation, but deliver us from evil', knowing that the capacity for evil and hypocrisy within *is* our great temptation. Yet we come with confidence, not fear, because we come to the light of a Judge who is also our Saviour.

John and Jesus may have been excoriating about hypocrisy, particularly religious hypocrisy. John may have said 'the axe is laid to the root of the trees'; but for all his rage, he still held out hope that some at least of the trees might show fruits worthy of repentance, and be spared. And we know that for all Christ's anger with them, some among the Pharisees got the point of what he was saying, and followed him.

Advent is a time for us to get the point as well.