

Intro to readings

But before we launch into the readings want to start with a very short bit of basic context for anyone who is new to Church to the bible etc...

Now the **bible isn't a book**...well it is a book but it's not one book it's **lots of books!** It's **really confusing for people** because **unless you have grown up in the Church (and paid attention)** there is no reason you would know that.

So we have a **collection of ancient books put together**, like a **library, to make one book**. The **first half**, which is the longest bit, (**Old Testament as we most commonly call it**) has all the **holy books of the Jewish people**, it tells their history, has their religious **poems and songs, has stories of their prophets**.

But most importantly for us it **tells us how they understood God acting in their lives, in their nations** – it is the **story of their relationship with God**.

Then **the 2nd half of this wonderful library**, which is **much shorter**, and written **100s of years later tells of Jesus**. Of his life, **what happened after he died**, the ups and downs of the early followers and the **beginning of the Church**.

At the **end of the new bit** (which is still nearly 2,000 years old!) We have a **load of letters to the early followers of Jesus**, the people who were **beginning to come together, the early Church**. **Lot of those letters written by a man called Paul**.

So this is a **bit of one of the letters to the Church** and we're going to **think about what it might say to us today**, 2,000 years later,

about how we can come together as Christians, how we can **talk to the people around us** about what it **means to follow Jesus** and how we can do that without being like the Pharisees and slipping into the hypocrite trap.

1 Thessalonians 2:1-13

You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

You remember our labour and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers. As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers.

Matthew 23:1-12

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be

greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. But 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. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

When I was a **Chaplain at Keele** there was a Sunday evening **student led service**. The students who organised it always came up with really **interesting themes** for the term. One year it was on animals in the bible – very random when your theme is ‘camels’ or ‘fish’ – but quite fun thinking of interesting readings!

But the **best series** they had (I think!) was entitled **’10 things I hate about Christians’** – (those you who haven’t got the reference, there was a film entitled ‘10 things I hate about you!’) It was remarkably **easy to think of things** – and the top of the list was **’hypocrisy’**. What so often people see when they look at Christians is a group of people **who say one thing and do the opposite?**

Reading from **Matthew – Jesus condemning the hypocrisy** of the Pharisees – **do what they teach BUT not what they do!** That is what Jesus says.

In the other reading **Paul is saying** that he was modelling the **exact opposite**...by he is very way of encountering people, by his conduct (pure and blameless) the gospel was proclaimed so that people. **Do what I teach AND what I do!**

Why is hypocrisy top thing on the list of what **people hate about Christians?** It is because **what we preach**, what we call people to is **so often not how we live our lives**...of course, at **one level** that is **not surprising**. Jesus calls us **to perfection**...to journey with him

from where **we are to where we are meant to be**, and none of us, in **this lifetime will get there!**

More danger of us ending up hypocritical from the letter **from Paul** than there is from the Matthew reading....it is **an aspirational reading**, Paul talking about **where we should be aiming**, BUT it is when **we pretend we are there** that there are problems!

But the **reason accused hypocrisy** is because **too often** we **pretend to be what we’re not**, not honest to either God or others. It’s not that we shouldn’t **teach/preach the perfection** to which we are called **BUT we need to be honest and true** about **where we are!**

This is where I am aiming but currently I am way back here and my life is bit of a mess!

At beginning got you to look at the **emotions chart**.to think about **how you are today and to offer it to God**. Doing this last week at Café Church and someone said...

I am here but I would like to be here!

Idea of honesty about **where we are but desire to change** and to move.

What Paul is **talking about is the power of our conduct**, of who we are, in the way we reach people, the **power of relationships**....and of course what **Jesus is highlighting is the danger that hypocrisy** will creep in.

Going to **reflect on that a bit in the light of my work**...growing a church from scratch in new communities in B&B

I am asked to talk about how things have grown in Broughton & Brooklands so fast....we have a **core community of around 25 adults** plus kids, and what I would say again and again is that it is **relationships, relationships, relationships.**

What is interesting is that is **exactly what Paul in this letter to the new Church in Thessalonica highlights too**

Two phrases stand out...

But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. (verse 7)

As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, (verse 11)

Paul is talking about **coming to the people in a relationship of care...as a parent...a mother** in the first image and **father** in the second. He **genuinely cared for the people**, it **wasn't a way** to get **them to believe**, it was a **genuine, passionate care** for the **people he was leading.**

Imagery of parents...of mother & father reinforces that because a parents care (should be) is ongoing, consistent and not dependent on the 'child's' response

How do we reach people? By being in **genuine relationship** with them, **getting to know people**, walking alongside them in their day to day journeys....and of course how we conduct ourselves in those relationships is crucial.

For me that has been a **big part of my first year** in the area...**spending time with people**, getting to know them, **building relationships.**

And because **I don't have a church** that **relationship building** has been with **people in the community**, and it **continues to be**

And **Paul says they were 'gentle'**....**gentleness is a much dismissed virtue.** Too often it is the **brash, in your face people** who we look up to, **admire.** But here **Paul talks of gently nursing people...**

If we are **called to show Jesus love** for the world to the people around us then this **image of gentle nursing** is a wonderful one.

Who are the people who have gently nursed you? Who are the people who you are called to gently nurse?

The **people who are gently caring** for those around them are the **golden nugget in a community**, they are the **place where glimpses of the Kingdom can be found.**

Paul **reminds us that it is our conduct**, our **relationships** that really are at **the heart of how we 'preach' the gospel**...I am reminded of that famous quote that St Francis is reputed to have said

'Preach the gospel, and if necessary, use words'

As well as relationships **another key idea** in these verses is the **idea of honesty/integrity**...which brings us **back to the idea** about **being honest before God and others**...and is **critical if we are not to slip into hypocrisy..**

Couple of lines..

*For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives
or trickery, (verse 3)*

*You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and
blameless our conduct was toward you believers. (verse 10)*

Preachers/speakers.....**integrity** is what we look to...**brilliant
charismatic leader BUT** if we **don't feel there is an honesty** we
won't believe or follow what they say...

3 years ago had a sabbatical and looked at **new and emerging
Churches with the question in mind**, how do we reach the 21st
Century generation.

A lot of my conclusions I have put into practice in my work as
community/Pioneer minister in Broughton & Brooklands.

One of my conclusions was/is that you need to **provide a 'good'
initial experience for people:**

**Modern accessible publicity, websites, Facebook etc
Good coffee, worship people can relate to**

...one of the **main reasons for that** is to **provide the vehicle** for
building the relationships that I just spoke of.

Relationships are at the heart but we **need spaces, experiences
that help facilitate those relationships.**

So I do all of that in Broughton & Brooklands...**I produce lots of
high quality fliers for events, we do Café Church**, which is
relaxed and easy for people to come to, to bring their kids, to **build
relationships..**

BUT without integrity, a **truth at the heart** then all of that could be,
what **Paul describes as 'trickery'** – **cheap tricks to get people
along.**

A ring doughnut with an empty centre...we need some jam in the
middle

Because, while I do believe that **we need to connect with people
where they are, we need to build relationships**, to provide the
vehicles to offer gentle care to those around us **BUT without truth
and integrity at the heart it is all hollow.**

To me, one of the **critical things is about being honest about our
faith**, and I mean that **in all sorts of ways.**

**Honest about what we believe, but also honest with people
about what we don't believe or are not sure of.**

Honest about our care for others...that it is genuine

The **hypocrisy stuff** I mentioned at the beginning also comes from
this **sense that people have** that somehow the **Christian
community are full of people who are sorted (or pretend they
are)**, who **don't question, who don't doubt...** **people sense a lack
of honesty.**

Paul uses this scary phrase of being **'pure, upright and
blameless'** – too often we **hear that** and think that means we need

make ourselves perfect, we need to pretend we are all those things, and before we know it we are in the **hypocrisy trap**.

But it seems to me that being **pure, upright and blameless** comes **not from our own ability** or conduct but from **the forgiveness we find in Jesus**.....we are **pure, upright and blameless NOT because we are naturally so**, not because we don't continue to mess up, BUT because **we are honest before God** in our need for **forgiveness and the opportunity to start again**.

That sort of honesty places us with people, not 'above' people. It **reminds us of our continual need for God**, that we **stretch for perfection but in this lifetime will never get there**

Going to sing one of my favourite hymns about God taking all that we are....and transforming it...