

19th March 2017

Matthew 23-24

I wrote this sermon on Friday. My opening line was 'The England Rugby team are record breakers clocking up 19 successive victories'. Pride comes before the fall eh? Which is the first thing I want to focus on in this sermon.

One of the stars for England is Billy Vunipola who at one time was a pupil at Castle School in Thornbury. He lost his way and his place in the England set-up during the autumn and it prompted Vunipola to experience his own road-to-Damascus moment and he blamed his arrogance and ungratefulness for his dramatic slump in form.¹

"The biggest thing for me has been my belief in God and I felt like I went away from that," Vunipola said.

"A similar example is Manny Pacquiao - he had strong faith and when he went away from it, he went into gambling and things that went against his faith. He kind of stagnated and didn't improve. The biggest thing for me was getting ahead of myself and not being humble enough to realise that even if I'd had a good game, I still had to work on my game.

"I read a passage [from the Bible] that said the arrogant will be humbled and the humble will be lifted up. I guess I was just humbled.

"I kind of got used to playing at a standard which I felt was normal, but it was obviously a good standard to be able to play for England, but I took advantage of that.

"I was just thinking that my brute size alone would be enough for me and it wasn't.

His mother is a Methodist minister and she brought some home truths to him.

"Sometimes you don't want to hear it but you have to," said Vunipola, "That was the biggest thing; listening to stuff that dents your ego," said Vunipola of his heart-to-heart with his mother.

"You have to humble yourself to be lifted again. I think I've done that and the biggest thing is working on things every week. If I'm told that I've played well, I won't take that as a reason to not work on things.

Today's reading includes that verse that Vunipola quoted: for those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Our Lent sermons are following Matthew's account of Holy Week and the Passion of Jesus from Palm Sunday

1

to Easter Sunday. We are reading through them to see not only the suffering passion of Jesus, but also what Jesus was passionate about. Through reading these chapters we will discover why Jesus was crucified.

Today we look at chapters 23 and 24.

In chapter 23 of Matthew, are Jesus criticisms of religious leaders and the seven woes against the scribes and Pharisees. In my 50 years of belonging to church I have never heard a church leader speak on this passage. I wonder why?

In verses 1-12 he criticises the religious leaders for hypocrisy, not practising what they preach and burdening the ordinary people with heavy loads of rules and regulations.

But do not do what they do, for they do not practise what they preach. ⁴They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

⁵ 'Everything they do is done for people to see

He says they like to show off and pretend to be all high and mighty and receive status but the greatest among you will be your servants. For those who exalt they will

be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Jesus is passionate about integrity, humility and service. There is compassion and pragmatism towards those who are burdened by rules and religious requirements.

He criticizes the hypocritical attitudes of the religious leaders. They knew the scriptures but did not live by them. They didn't care about being holy – just looking holy in order to receive people's admiration and praise. Today, many may say they follow Jesus but they don't live by his standards of love and matching actions with beliefs.

People desire positions of leadership not only in business and politics but also in the church. It is dangerous when love for position grows stronger than loyalty to God and Jesus condemns leaders who serve themselves rather than others. To him greatness comes from serving – giving of yourself to help God and others. Service keeps us aware of other's needs and it stops us from focusing only on ourselves. What kind of greatness do we seek?

In a moment we will have our Annual General Meeting and it will be an opportunity to thank people for their service in this church, service without any thought of reward for themselves. We give thanks for the servants of Christ and the humility in which they serve. And we get to elect some leaders.

But then Jesus goes on to give seven woes about the scribes and Pharisees. These were the religious leaders of Jesus' day and they had great influence and power. Jesus makes the following stinging accusations because their hunger for more power, money and status had made them lose sight of God and their blindness was spreading to the whole nation.

Look at these seven woes.

13 'Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.'

The Pharisees made claim to being the true interpreters of scripture. However, Jesus accuses them that their teaching and practice is misleading others. They are preventing people from hearing the true message of Jesus and following him.

15 'Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.'

The Pharisees had complex legal systems, rules and regulations about everything in life. They devoted their lives to the details. Yet Jesus says that when they win converts they impose such heavy burdens on them that they are worse off than if they had never heard of Judaism in the first place. A similar thing would be to say embrace Christianity: if you didn't know what sin

was before you will after! You weren't terrified of God beforehand but we'll make you terrified of God now. Don't enjoy life: Come to church and be miserable!

The next woe Jesus says don't take oaths – let your yes be yes and your no be no. Be people of honesty and integrity.

The fourth woe:

23 'Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practised the latter, without neglecting the former. 24 You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.'

You can get caught up in the letter of the law, the small detail. The bigger picture, to which they are blind, is the question 'are you practising and teaching justice, mercy and faithfulness?' It is a litmus test of any decision: is it just, is it compassionate, is it faithful to the character of God that we know in Christ Jesus?

The next couple of woes are all about the externals – looking holy, saying the right words, doing the right things, yet inside you harbour hatred, fear, malice etc.

So Jesus ends up calling them: 'You snakes! You brood of vipers! It is not too difficult to see why the Pharisees and scribes plotted to kill Jesus.'

Chapter 24 is commonly known as the little apocalypse. The big apocalypse is of course the Book of Revelation. An apocalypse – the word means ‘revelation or ‘unveiling’, - is a kind of Jewish and Christian literature that reveals or unveils the future in language loaded with images and symbols. Apocalyptic literature speaks of a time of great suffering followed by divine deliverance.

In this chapter Jesus foretells events that include:

False messiahs and false prophets

Wars and rumours of wars

Earthquakes and famines

Persecution by authorities, councils, and kings

A desolating sacrilege where it should not be

A time of suffering greater than there’s ever been

Cosmic disorder, darkened sun, no light from the moon, stars falling from the sky

The Son of Man coming on clouds with great power and glory and his angels gathering the elect from the four ends of the earth.

Specific warnings include:

Beware that no one leads you astray

Flee to the mountains

Keep alert – watch – keep wake.

The ‘end times’ is a difficult subject. It was urgent in the first century, when the threat of Roman violence as a result of Jewish revolt was tangible and happened between 66-70- AD. Thousands were slaughtered in those years: the embryonic Christian community were either killed or fled in persecution and the church became even more Gentile. The Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and the Jews dealt with mercilessly. Matthew’s gospel was written for a Jewish readership in the context of an expected imminent end of the world, aiming to combat complacency and challenging their preoccupations and use of time. After 2000 years of Christianity, is there any point in living in eager anticipation of such an event, considering the generations of disappointed Christians? As humans we tire of watching and waiting – when will this injustice end, when will people have enough to eat and drink, when will the suffering be over? The call of Jesus is to keep going: keep awake. Don’t give up faith.

Today, 1.4 billion people suffer the injustice of extreme poverty. We are having a retiring collection for the crisis in East Africa. Some of that is a man-made crisis due to war.

In South Sudan, everyone has a story of personal trauma since civil strife broke out in the world's newest state in December 2013.²

A [recent survey by the South Sudan Law Society](#) found that 41% of participants showed symptoms consistent with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, levels comparable with post-genocide Rwanda.

Some 63% reported that a close family member had been killed and 41% reported that they have witnessed a friend or family member being killed.

The impact of repeated exposure to trauma cannot be underestimated. Many South Sudanese—including political and military leaders—have never experienced peace. Trauma has profound implications for mental health, while historic grievances left unaddressed make for an unstable future. Understanding this deep-seated trauma must be fundamental to any peace-building approach.

Bishop Paride Taban, UN peace prize recipient who is regarded as South Sudan's Desmond Tutu, is at the age of 80, one of few who can remember a time of peace. His approach may not provide an instant solution but it is a starting point that others could emulate.

“Every morning I say these words and sentences, and that helps me to deal with trauma.

“Love, joy, peace, patience, compassion, sympathy, kindness, truthfulness, gentleness, self-control, humility, poverty, forgiveness, mercy, friendship, trust, unity, purity, faith, hope.

”The sentences: I love you, I miss you, thank you, I forgive, we forget, together, I am wrong, I am sorry. If all put this into their hearts, every day they repeat, there will be no wars in South Sudan, there will be permanent peace.”

Jesus calls us to share his passion for peace, forgiveness and reconciliation, despite wars and rumours of wars. To keep awake, keep alert, keep praying and working for a better tomorrow, until he comes.

It is not profitable to spend time speculating on the future apocalypse like some Christians or groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses. Jesus says in this passage no one knows the day and hour, not even the angels in heaven or even the Son, only the Father. The point is that Christ is our apocalypse. He is the beginning and the end, the alpha and omega. He is the one we trust to win the victory over all the forces of evil, sin, death and destruction. If you have that hope you wait in confidence and work for his kingdom with perseverance and humility.

² <https://medium.com/@caglobal/south-sudan-dealing-with-the-past-in-order-to-face-the-future-37c6e9fff44d#.t582xuf24>

Jesus is passionate about integrity, humility, and service. He seeks justice, mercy and faithfulness and urges his followers to hold fast to these principles come what may. Keep alert, keep awake, and don't give in to fear: trust in the one who one day will come again in great power and glory to gather his people.

PRAYER

Keep us awake, God,
to see the signs of your Spirit at work
within this world of uncertainty and risk.

Where people are poor and powerless,
ground down by their circumstances
and ready to give up hope,
May they know the touch and care of others.

Where people are rich and protected,
separated from reality by their possessions
and eager to have more,
May they know the sterile emptiness of wealth.

Where we are out of touch with ourselves,
unable to express our feelings
and surviving rather than living
may we discover the abundant life you offer us.

Amen.