



## Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost 30 Oct 2011

*Micah 3:5-12, Psalm 43, 1 Thessalonians 3:5-13,  
Matthew 23:1-12, 37-39*

May I speak in the name of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

A. So then the priest stood up in front of the congregations and he said: “There’s something wrong with this mike” and the people replied “and also with you”

Standing at the front, sitting on seats of power, are dangerous places to be: You have to take whatever gets thrown at you – and rightly so. The ancient art of throwing rotten eggs seems to have gone out of fashion. Perhaps we should bring it back.

It’s an interesting coincidence that we have readings about power and its dangers – focussing on the Pharisees especially but also on Israel – in the week when Perth finds itself on the world stage, hosting the Commonwealth Heads of Government with leaders here from important nations (Britain, India, South Africa, Canada, Nigeria) as well as many others, representing a third of the world’s people.

We’re all aware how dangerous power is - and we all have some in our own sphere and we all know by experience how easily it seduces us into misusing it – to dominate others, or exploit them, to boost our position and our ego. I guess that’s why, in Australia, we’re wary of the signs of power; we’re suspicious of robes and titles and even of suits: we like everything to look laid-back and egalitarian.

But the trouble is that power is still there – and hidden power may be more dangerous than the upfront kind.

It was Lord Acton, the 19<sup>th</sup> Century historian, who put it succinctly when he said “Power corrupts. And absolute power corrupts absolutely”

There is an example of that in the ancient world – and indeed in many societies and cultures, ancient and modern. Society was organised in households, each controlled by the senior male, the patriarch. One of the assumptions of a patriarchal household is that the patriarch has absolute power within the household, including – in the ancient world certainly - the right of sexual access to all the women, children and slaves of both sexes. It’s an attitude and practice which we are discovering has been lingering on in our society – only now we’re looking at it from the point of view of the weak, and we are calling it abuse. We’re rightly concerned for the way such practices damage the victims; but we need to be aware of the way they also damage those who wield such power.

At the world level we can think of a country like Zimbabwe as an example of power misused. Yes, certainly misused by the British, and then, dramatically by Mugabe with his politics of envy and resentment. There's a man who wants to have absolute power and finds he can't have it. It seems that if he can't remove white economic interests without ruining the country – well, then he'll ruin the country.

In this respect what we call “democracy”, is often a muddling and uninspiring reality, but it is an important symbol of the need for power to be shared and limited. It's about recognising our human limitations, our need to share tasks and share power, to rule by persuasion and consent (and it's true not just at the national level but the family, the school, the parish.) Though the Greeks invented it, and the French talk a lot about it, I think that as a practical reality in the modern world it's largely a British invention, not because of some British virtue but mainly by default. English history is littered with kings like King John, Charles I and George III, who really wanted to be absolute rulers but found they couldn't get away with it. The threat of having your head chopped off is a powerful stimulus to creative thought, as people have often found out. In the end it produces an institution like Parliament, or the Commonwealth of Nations – or the Anglican Communion, come to that – which is muddly and cumbersome and slow to act but resists the pressure to claim absolute powers or rights.

Shared, distributed power always seems too slow to people who are quite sure they know what's right and what's wrong. But the result seems to be safer and better in the long run, and for the rest of us. I think that resistance to absolute power is a good thing, now, when nations seem quite sure they have the right to interfere in other peoples' affairs. We may not have liked Saddam Hussein, we may not have liked Colonel Gaddafi, but by what right have other nations bombed Iraqi and Libyan cities in pursuit of their own agendas? How will we feel when someone finds a good reason for bombing us?

So power is dangerous stuff – and not only for the victims. It's also dangerous for those who wield it, in all sorts of psychological and spiritual ways. The pride which makes people want power is what makes it dangerous for them to have it. But we collude with that: humility, broad vision and sensitivity to others are seldom qualities we reward at the ballot box.

B. The dangers are just as great, or even more, among spiritual leaders. “The Scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat”, says Jesus. I presume the seat is metaphorical – either that, or it's very large, if the Scribes and the Pharisees are all going to try to sit on it at once. But a hundred years later there was a “Seat of Moses” in some synagogues – a chair of authority for the President of the synagogue to sit in and to teach the Law of Moses. To sit in such a seat, or an Archbishop's throne, is dangerous, and it demands inner discipline and self-awareness. Those who sit there need our constant prayers.

One of the dangers in a position of power is appearing to be inconsistent or hypocritical, saying one thing and doing another. Jesus lays that charge against the Pharisees and the Scribes. And yet the word “hypocrite!” is a very easy word to throw at other people, especially if you don't know what motivates them and the reasons for their decisions.

People sometimes say to me “I don’t go to church – there are too many hypocrites” and I say: “Oh, there’s always room for one more.” It’s an easy jibe. Those who set themselves challenges and try to live up to those challenges, to some higher possibility are setting themselves up to fail, to some extent, and then to be laughed at by those who’ve never got out of their armchairs. This applies to you and me as much to the Pharisees.

So we have to take this accusation of hypocrisy with a pinch of salt and so, too, when we read that the Pharisees laid heavy legal burdens on others, and when we are told that they loved to swan around at banquets with long fringes in order to impress people.

Well, maybe. But we know that wearing fringes and phylacteries was commanded in the Law not in order to show off, but as a reminder of God. We also know that other groups, like the Qumran sect, said that the Pharisees made the Law too easy. They call them “the seeker of smooth things”. Too easy, not too hard.

There is in general a problem about how to square the negative picture of the Pharisees, which we find in the Gospels – smug, hypocritical, small-minded – with the positive way they’re seen in other contemporary writings. The Jewish historian, Josephus, tells us they were not simply respected as religious authorities, he tells us they were loved by the people for making the things of God accessible to them. This is a completely opposite picture. Putting it all together, I conclude (with most scholars) that most of the sayings in this chapter do not come from Jesus himself but from Matthew, the author of the gospel, and they come from a time 50 years after the crucifixion when Jews and Christians faced each other as rivals, rival claimants to speak for God. So in the story, the Pharisees stand for the Jewish authorities of Matthew’s own day. That’s why the chapter speaks with such venom and such violent envy. “You snakes! You brood of vipers!” (23.33)

So we can’t take the chapter straight, as a factual description of how the Pharisees were in the ancient world. But, of course, the dangers that it points to are real. They are real temptations for people in positions of power, as I was saying earlier.

Take those long fringes. I can give you a good reason why I’m wearing these coloured robes to the glory of God but I can’t be absolutely sure that I don’t also just enjoy dressing up! Motives can always be mixed: does that make me a hypocrite? I leave the answer to you! And the titles: “Don’t call anyone Rabbi or Father” we are told. Such titles can always flatter one’s vanity, but don’t they also foster respectful acceptance of the other – in a way that’s quite delightful when we meet in, say, an Asian culture where such titles or forms of polite address are the norm and everyone is “Father this” or “Mother that”.

Matthew’s Jesus can’t be telling us not to respect our leaders. He is speaking of the need for us, and for them, to keep in mind that all true leadership, like all true “fathership”, and all true teaching, comes from God and points us back to God. So when he says “Call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father – in heaven” he doesn’t mean you can’t even call your father “Father”, he means all fatherly authority, like all authority stands

under the authority of God. We need to respect our spiritual teachers and our leaders, like our parents, and we need test their authority and their teaching and their rule to see whether it comes from them or really from God.

That passage concludes with something Jesus certainly said about power and its' dangers: "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted". This is true and a wise saying – and yet there's a trap there too: how about if I humble myself in order to be exalted? Pride masquerading as humility is no great virtue.

Yes, power is dangerous and the human heart is infinitely devious. None of us should be given power really. No wonder the Spirit and the Wisdom of God laments through Jesus: "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings – and you were not willing".

That longing, that yearning, that wounded love of the Creator for us his wayward children, that's the true voice of authority. That, and not proclamations or policies or press statements.

Can we hear the voice of God, and God's longing for us? Can we name the things in our hearts that keep us from turning to God, keep us from letting God mend us and love us into wholeness? That voice of love is the true voice of authority, in heaven and on earth.

Well, that's it. That's my teaching for today, and you have to test it. You have to see whether, in your experience, it's true and points towards God or not. I can't tell. The human heart is very devious. I can only leave it there and pray: The Lord be with you.

John Dunnill