

How Wide is your Rainbow Flag?

A sermon on Matthew 23:1-12 by Nathan Nettleton, 5 November 2017

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Message

Jesus's quest for reconciliation is far wider and more discomfortingly radical than our tendency to jump on the bandwagon of popular justice causes.

Sermon

In tonight's gospel reading, we heard Jesus accuse the religious lawyers and the devoutly religious Pharisees of playing to the crowd. "They do all their deeds to be seen by others," he said. In an age of social media, he perhaps would have accused them of doing all their deeds to accumulate "likes" from their followers.

Which got me thinking, because over the past month or so, that is an accusation that has been levelled at me a number of times on social media. People who objected to some of the things I've said about sexuality and marriage have thrown angry bible verses at me, and when I have attempted any sort of biblical response to their use of the Bible, a number of them have snorted that I am just pandering to the tastes and the itchy ears of a popular audience and that I am just throwing out click-bait to see how many "likes" I can get. So there you go: I am being lumped in with the scribes and Pharisees as a recipient of Jesus's rebuke.

Now I'm not saying for a moment that I could never be fairly accused of this. In fact, any time we hear Jesus unmasking human hypocrisy and we imagine that it is only directed at other people, we are almost certainly missing the point. The challenge is always to hear these things and to examine ourselves and identify the ways that we ourselves are implicated.

But before I come back to examining myself and examining ourselves, I must first confess to having frequently felt the urge in these online discussions to point the finger and level the same accusation at others. The problem, of course, is that we all tend to assume that those who hold views that we strongly disagree with have questionable motivations and are more interested in the applause from their allies than in a genuine search for truth. And whatever the issue, both sides tend to imagine that of the other.

So what I have observed in a number of my critics is that they are very intent on making big loud statements, asserting their views as though they were self-evidently true. But when their statements are questioned, they are a lot less interested in engaging in any sort of genuine debate and exploration of the issues, either the biblical or social dimensions. And it seems to me that if you are really addressing those who disagree with you, then providing persuasive arguments backed up with good evidence and convincing explanation would be your main interest. Nobody changes their minds because someone shouts that they are wrong.

So if these people are showing so little interest in actually providing anything that might change their opponents' minds, who are they really wanting to be heard by? For whose benefit are they shouting? Are they perhaps really just trying to prove their credentials to their friends and supporters, to the people who already agree with them and among whom being seen to wave the flag boldly is likely to boost their status?

Now it is tempting to go on a rampage here and also start using the verse we heard where Jesus says that the Pharisees and religious lawyers don't practice what they preach for they tie up heavy burdens and lay them on the shoulders of others, but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to help. I've certainly seen many examples recently of people who are more than willing to load people up with impossible moral expectations, but have no willingness at all to get alongside people and learn their stories and share any sort of love and care and support.

So it's tempting to go on that rampage, but I suspect that it would ultimately be a cheap shot. As I said before, if we only see what these challenges say about other people, we are missing the point. In fact we are probably engaging in scapegoating. It is always tempting to recognise wrongdoing in someone else, and to punish it severely there as though crucifying them somehow purges and absolves the rest of us.

It is especially tempting when they are very obviously very guilty. The repulsive Harvey Weinstein has been a classic example of this lately. He is clearly horribly guilty, but many of us who join in the shrill chorus of condemnation are no doubt doing so in the hope that somehow crucifying him will cleanse us of our own guilt, or at least keep everyone focussed on his record instead of on ours. Identifying him as a scapegoat doesn't mean that he's at all innocent. It just means that our frenzied crucifixion of him makes us feel like we've dealt with the problem and so serves to help other equally guilty parties get away free.

So when we hear Jesus challenge the Pharisees for just playing to their fans and trying to rack up "likes" from their followers, and we see others doing the same thing in our own world, the real challenge is to avoid slipping down the easy path into scapegoating, and to stand back and take a good hard look at ourselves.

Jesus says of the Pharisees, "they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long." Phylacteries were little boxes containing scripture verses that were worn on the forehead and the left hand during morning and evening prayers in literal obedience to Deuteronomy 6:8 which said "Bind these commandments as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead." The long fringes referred to the tassels worn by Jewish men on the four corners of their outer garment or on their prayer shawl. This too was a literal obedience to biblical instruction (Numbers 15:38-41 and Deuteronomy 22:12).

Jesus is not criticising them for wearing these things. We can be pretty sure he did so himself, because we have the story of a woman reaching out in the crowd to touch the fringe of his garment in the hope that she would be thereby healed. What he is saying is that the Pharisees make these badges of their piety bigger than they need to be in the hope that doing so will make them appear even more pious to the onlookers.

Now the phylactery and fringes seem a bit weird to us, but only because they are foreign to our present culture. In principle and in practice, wearing them is no different from wearing a cross round your neck or a scripture verse on a t-shirt, or putting a Jesus sticker on the bumper of your car. Or to situate it more specifically in the midst of the present debate, it is no different from wearing a loud "Yes" t-shirt, or displaying a rainbow flag in your front window, or posting a selfie with your yes vote on your facebook page. I'm not criticising any of those things – Jesus wore the phylactery and fringes too – but the point is to notice how close to home his challenges actually are.

All of these things can be done as a way of communicating care and compassion and support to LGBT+ people at a time when they are being subjected to a particularly ugly torrent of abuse and indignity. But these things can also be done as a way of saying “Look at me, look at me. I’m in with the in crowd. I’m on board with all the latest causes. Look at me - a shining example of impeccably reconstructed enlightened sensitive masculinity.”

Quite frankly, there is nothing terribly courageous about flying a rainbow flag here in South Yarra, or in most hip inner city suburbs. We’ve had a big yes sign up out the front of the church for six weeks and it hasn’t even been vandalised. The one out the front of the Ormond Uniting Church didn’t even last 24 hours.

A few years ago at the Port Fairy Folk Festival, I heard a singer named Pat Drummond perform a great song that questioned Australia’s harsh refugee policies. At Port Fairy, there’s nothing controversial about expressing such views. Everyone will applaud you. But a couple of years later I heard him perform the same song at the Tamworth Country Music Festival. That time, I was really impressed. Singing it there took serious guts. Wearing a wide phylactery and long fringes in hostile territory is a very different thing to parading them in front of your own fan base.

When the Pharisees wore their phylacteries and fringes, or I wear a cross around my neck, or we put up our “Yes” sign out the front of the church, we are seeking to identify ourselves with the mission of God, with what God is doing in the world in the name of Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit. But as we realised when we wrestled with how to word our “Yes” sign, identifying ourselves with God’s mission can easily mutate into identifying ourselves with one crowd at the expense of another crowd.

We human beings have an almost insatiable desire to believe that we are above-average good people, and that those other people are not as good, or not as enlightened, or not as committed, or not as compassionate as us. And when we start making our phylacteries broad and our fringes long and our “yes” signs two and half metres wide, we can easily slide into believing the applause and thinking ourselves better than other people by these simple measures.

The mission of God in the world almost certainly does overlap with a number of popular causes, and so our support for the campaigns for marriage equality or for welcoming refugees into our community instead of locking them up in inhumane offshore detention centres can be natural expressions of our commitment to God’s mission of reconciliation and building a new world based on love for one another. But God’s mission is a lot wider than the popular causes, and a lot wider than most of us usually find comfortable. We love stories about Jesus partying with marginalised people and criticising the religious leaders, but we are less comfortable when we come across stories of Jesus attending dinner parties in the homes of those same religious leaders. Jesus was criticised by many for crossing religious boundaries to party with the frowned-upon, but he was also criticised by his own fan base for partying with the rich and powerful.

The mission of reconciliation that we see embodied in Jesus is always reaching out in both directions. If our campaigns succeed in changing policies or laws to include one group, but in the process of our campaigning we have poured hatred and scorn on another group, the

change of law won't be worth the increased hostility and the cause of reconciliation will have actually gone backwards. If our desire to be numbered among the good people leads us to denounce and shame others as the bad people, we will have deepened the divides that tear our world apart. And if we are living in our comfortable social bubbles surrounded by people who think like us and who give us lots of "likes" for preaching to the choir, we will end up surprised and confused when some crack in the social fabric confronts us with an angry thoroughly unreconciled world that has festered and burned while we had our heads in the sand.

God's love and care for us and for the people we care about is actually exactly the same as God's love and care for the people who annoy us and infuriate us, and even for the people who despise us. God's mission of reconciliation is always bigger and wider and more multi-directional than our favourite causes. And that's because God wants far more than just leaving us in an improved little bubble which, like a gated community, lives in ever-increasing fear that the festering outside world might one day break down our walls and drown us in hatred and violent chaos. The world that God wants for us is one where all enemies have been, not defeated, but turned into friends, and where the walls are no longer needed and gracious diversity looks a whole lot bigger and richer and more exuberantly life-giving than even the most hip of neighbourhoods.

So whether it is phylacteries or rainbow flags, let's continue to display them as a call to the justice and reconciliation of God's approaching future, but let's not kid ourselves that they make us better people, and let's not kid ourselves that the applause from our friends means we've grasped the extent of God's vision for the world. And let's allow the extant of God's vision for the whole world and for all people continue to challenge us too, and to shake us into becoming part of the solution rather than part of the problem, into becoming a living example of God's reckless overflowing love for the entire world.