

**When Christian Leaders Fail**  
**31<sup>st</sup> Sunday, Year A**  
**Matthew 23: 1-12**  
**30 October 2011**

Squirreled away in the Book of Common Prayer is one of the more interesting of the 39 articles of religion, entitled "Of the unworthiness of the Ministers, which hinders not the effect of the Sacrament." It goes like this:

Although in the visible Church the evil be ever mingled with the good, and sometimes the evil have chief authority in the Ministration of the Word and Sacraments, yet forasmuch as they do not the same in their own name, but in Christ's, and do minister by his commission and authority, we may use their Ministry, both in hearing the Word of God, and in receiving the Sacraments. Neither is the effect of Christ's ordinance taken away by their wickedness, nor the grace of God's gifts diminished from such as by faith and rightly do receive the Sacraments ministered unto them; which be effectual, because of Christ's institution and promise, although they be ministered by evil men.

This I suppose is what Jesus was driving at this morning when he counselled the people and his disciples to do what the scribes and the Pharisees tell you and listen to what they say; but do not be guided by what they do: since they do not practise what they preach. The Pharisees were his chief competitors as the premier holiness party of second temple Judaism. Today's Rabbis are their direct descendants in contemporary Jewish religion. But of course 2,000 years on these words apply to us – we are the Pharisees now, and these words are particularly applicable to Christian leaders. They are also of considerable relevance to the people of God in general as they grapple with the issue of what to do when Christian leaders fail.

The particular failing of religious leaders, which Jesus has in his sights, is the love of status, prestige and honour. It could be argued that the contemporary church has lost status and prestige to such an extent that this is no longer a temptation. However, this moral failing takes new guises in each generation. Ours has seen the rise of celebrity clergy adept at getting themselves in the media, ever ready to offer a shallow opinion about any topic of the day. And the love of pomposity, quaint titles, funny costumes and self-importance can play itself out in even quite small churches.

I would want to argue that the Anglican Church is relatively well inoculated against these failings because of the classical Anglican virtues of humour, humility and irony. One of our saving graces is that we manage to combine a grand style with a light touch, to have the trappings of office in fall traditional grandeur, without by and

large taking ourselves seriously while we do it. The good-humoured debunking of the folly that often goes with power and prestige has come to our rescue often.

Where we have not done so well are in programmes like the boundaries in ministry modules, which all clergy are obliged to do at stages one, two and three. Brought in to stop clergy sexual misbehaviour and imprudent boundariless pastoral relationships, they are a curious combination of role-playing and action reflection methods without much content. As one mentor put it, “The great thing about the boundaries in ministry programme is that it gets morality out of it, and boils the issues down to clergy maintaining appropriate levels of professional conduct.”

To which I would want to reply that morality has everything to do with it, that when clergy fail the primary person they have let down is God, who grieves over what they have done, and is quite capable of assertively ordering the unfolding of divine providence to challenge their bad behaviour. The New Testament frequently puts forward holiness codes of conduct that it makes clear are mandatory for all Christians, and especially Christian leaders, who have a responsibility to model the high standards of personal morality contained therein. Living like this is essential if a believer is to be connected to God. You have to be congruent with what God wants in personal behaviour if you want to know God as a presence in your life.

And when clergy fail it is not just their personal confounding that is at stake, but the fact that they risk dragging their people down with them. It is not just the hurt, confusion and betrayal feelings that a congregation feel if their pastor is caught out in a major moral failing. Often the clergy skilfully cover their tracks in what they get up to, but if enough of this nefarious behaviour goes on then a parish, or a diocese, or an entire national church risks losing the mandate of heaven. By that I mean that God is quite capable of withdrawing his Holy Spirit and his providential assistance to a church if enough of its leaders have lost the plot in a way of life that is distant from what God wants for his people. When that happens a church is in deep, deep trouble. The faithful laity who go on receiving the sacraments from such tainted leaders will continue to be right with God, as that article of religion I read out a few minutes ago makes clear. But that will take place in the context of a church that may be foundering at a collective level in God’s eyes.

It is these theological, scriptural and ethical issues that ought to be at the forefront of boundaries in ministry refresher courses for clergy. These are the rules that are the rungs on the ladder up to heaven if you want to be a great priest. These are the common sense tips of the trade that you will follow if you want to stay out of certain situations

that are likely to lead to your downfall. This is the kind of tack that the mentors of the programme could usefully take.

The penitential seasons of Lent and Advent can also be useful review times for Christian leaders to consider what are their blind spots. Perhaps their parishioners have been longing to tell them about these for some time. Every Christian has particular vulnerabilities and character weaknesses. The demands of ministry usually throw these into high relief. As Clarice Greenslade, former Vicar of Diamond harbour, once said to me, "This is a job Hugh that finds out all your immaturity, and obliges you to do something about it."

That is the final point I want to leave you with. The great thing about being a priest, one of the reasons why it is such a deeply satisfying job, is that really you have no choice but to go deeper in your immersion into the things of God, to become more thoroughly acquainted with his maturity making ways as you go forward in ministry. The demands of the vocation can be the making of you as a person, pushing you out of your comfort zone, getting you more involved with people at a more than superficial level, and putting you in touch with the most interesting and absorbing reality in the world – God. Priests who have kept the fire in their belly, who have nurtured faith, hope and love in God and in other people, are unlikely to be bored, lonely and in a mood for mischief.