

Focusing on the real issues

Are we heading for destruction?

Mark 13

I wonder how much time people spend in church circles worrying about things we don't need to... or discussing things that we really shouldn't... or making assumptions about things we, in truth, have no idea about? I wonder how much church time and church meetings all over the world and throughout history spent precious time arguing or agreeing on issues that really were quite irrelevant? Have you ever been to a church meeting and thought... this is a waste of time?

I wonder how many tears and fights and hurt feelings and misunderstandings there have been over the centuries from people in church focusing on things they really not only didn't need to, but in all honesty they shouldn't have at all? I know church choirs would never be like this... arguing over petty things.

I wonder how much time, money and resources were wasted throughout the ages by churches on projects and programmes that in the end were basically pointless? I wonder how well we would feel if we really knew the cost of all these pointless activities - maybe pretty ill.

I think if there is one thing the church struggles with most it is focusing on the right things and letting go of things we don't need to worry about. Getting worked up over some things and neglecting far more important things. Of course we could say this is quite subjective.

But then again I wonder how many people left the church, because church was focusing on things that really didn't do anything good for people. People came to church and felt judged and condemned rather than encouraged and affirming. People found churches boring and not life-giving places. Churches lost their focus in bringing the Good News to society. And the question I ask this morning is if we are actually still a little lost...

Consider what I'm about to say and see if you think I'm right or not...

In churches throughout the world today many Christians don't hold much regard for the Pharisees. Because we see Jesus giving them a hard time in the Bible - "Woe to you Pharisees, Teachers of Religious Law." We see them as basically misguided religious bigots. We easily see them as missing the point of God's Word... don't we?

But did you consider this...?

Around 800 years before Christ Israel was doing pretty well as a country. Wealth for the upper and middle classes. They believed that the way they were living was being blessed by God, because life was good for many people - they had extra money to buy things they didn't need. Sure they did dabble in worshipping other gods, but there wasn't any harm in doing this, especially if it ensured their crops grew... and it seemed to be working. The economy was purring along. They went to the Temple to worship - they brought their sacrifices religiously.

And yet we know, in hindsight, that they were heading for destruction - the prophets talked about their treatment of vulnerable people, they talked about **to obey is better than sacrifice**... Israel ended up in Exile. And here is where the Pharisees came in.

After the Exile, after their return to a broken Jerusalem and a ruin Temple Israel figured it out that obeying the Law was actually quite important - far more than they appreciated before the Exile. Their beautiful Temple was a shadow of what it once was. So we the book of Ezra, Ezra who is known as the first Pharisee; the Pharisees who read the prophets who said to obey is better than sacrifice; the Pharisees who focused on the law - keeping the law, like the prophets were telling people - to obey. Because *to **obey** is better than sacrifice*. The law became all-important - their lifeline to God and their faithful outworking of their faith. Their assurance of being right. The Law was to keep their relationship with God alive.

The problem is that by Jesus' time many Pharisees and Teachers of Religious Law - not all but many - were deluded and became just as bad as the people in the 8th BCE. Their lives were pretty good superficially. Even life under Roman rule did allow people to prosper and we again have the rich and poor. And we see many educated respectable religious people becoming deluded and coming into conflict with Jesus. Even though they focused on the Law they were still able to neglect the poor and live a life that Jesus spoke strongly against. They were focusing on the wrong things, discussing things that weren't good and worrying about issues that were in God's sight pointless.

The question I want to ask us is if we, as the Church, are susceptible of being in the same position as the Pharisees in Jesus' time and Israel in the 8th BCE. We are wealthy, we have excess. There would be real concern if we did only had enough for our daily bread - we usually have much more in reserve. We are a typical white middle class church - like many other churches in NZ.

Yet in NZ there are reports of people living beneath the poverty line and although we know there are churches and agencies that do help, how much are we really doing? What about the lonely, the shut ins, those falling through health services and other government services? Are these things taking up most of our time and resources or do other things - locally and nationally - capture our attention? Do our Synods or vestry meetings build up steam looking for solutions for the needs of other - looking at us being a solution?

What things really get our goat? What things take up our time in Church meetings? Bishop meetings, Clergy meetings? Things that affect us personally, directly...?

In our Gospel reading this morning (Mark 13:1-8, 32-37) we have this difficult passage of Jesus foretelling future events. But he isn't really, I don't think. What Jesus is really saying is for us to focus on the important things and to let go of the things keeping us from serving God.

In the chapter before Mark 13 Jesus talks of the greatest commandments - loving God and other people. Jesus then warns his disciples of the deluded teachers of religious law because of their lack of love - especially to the vulnerable. Then Jesus talks about the widow giving a few cents - all she had and how this meant far more to God than those wealthy people who gave a tiny part of their surplus wealth.

This leads to Chapter 13 and the future focus delusion. Jesus says it's not about looking to future events and getting side tracked with predicting things. Which we have seen over the years. Rather Jesus says the most important thing is to be like a faithful servant in waiting for the master to return. Doing their jobs faithfully - not sleeping on the job. It is the same word used when the disciples fell asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane before Jesus' arrest.

The point Jesus is making is that no one knows when Christ will return - not even the angels in heaven. Do you think the angels are concerned, predicting when Jesus may return? Or do you think they are focused on other things. Be on guard, stay alert, and pray (as some other versions add). Be ready to serve God in any way we can. Don't let us lose focus or worse start focusing on things that aren't that important at all.

So let me simply ask you what your focus in life is on? What things do we fight for and what things do we not fight for - that perhaps we should? How do we ensure we are on the right track and not heading for destruction?

For we don't want to be in the same boat as Israel before the Exile or the Pharisees in Jesus' time. Both groups doing well materially, both educated and empowered to live anyway they wished. Both were religious and pious, publically acceptable and even admired. But they were wrong in God's eyes.

I just simply want us to be aware of falling into the same trap as others before us. There's no reason why this can't happen to us. We need to be so careful in our faith, because history shows how easy it is for even the most dedicated zealous devoted people to lose their way. To firmly think they are on God's side when in truth they have wandered from God.

I was thinking how can we really know if we are on the right track? And a theme I saw that was similar between Israel 800BCE and the Pharisees was that they didn't fear God. They knew the right words to say. They knew how to act in public. They knew what sounded good. But underneath they didn't fear God. Their lives didn't reflect this fear. Not a fear that paralyses us. But a fear of awe and reverence towards God. A fear that says serving God is far more important than serving ourselves - our comfort, our priorities, our securities, the things we want... or we fear what others may think of us... God became a means to an end.

Today I wonder if Christians in NZ truly fear God as we should. Or do we take and leave God as we please. Thinking God will take up our slackness, our apathy or indifference in loving God and others. The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom and wisdom is how God wants us to live. Perhaps this question far more than anything else needs to be seriously explored by Churches today.

As Micah said it best - O people, the LORD has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. Fear the Lord if you are wise. (6:8 NLT).