

Pharisees in Luke 11

This week we continue our gastronomic journey through Luke's Gospel, using the 8 meals he describes as a window into the story that unfolds. And this week the meal table is the setting of yet another confrontation. If I could travel back in time, I think I'd be reluctant to invite Jesus for a meal, because you'd never know how your guest was going to behave – and what you might hear.

We all know the story, and it's lost its punch: Jesus has come to preach a message of love and grace and peace, and the Pharisees don't like it because they represent the forces of ritual and law and pig-headedness. No wonder Jesus came into conflict with them. They were the very opposite of all that he stood for. Or were they?

Most of what we know of the Pharisees comes from the conflicts with Jesus that we read of in the Gospels – and so twenty centuries later, it is only natural that we end up a pretty one-sided view of who they were. And we forget that the reason that we read of so much conflict between the Pharisees and Jesus is that it simply was not expected! They stood for the same thing, they gave up their lives to serve God, and committed themselves to listening to God, and seeking justice, and living ethically. Jesus and the Pharisees wanted the same thing, which is why many, many Pharisees became followers of Jesus.

And it is worth trying to put yourself into the position of the Pharisee in this particular story. You are convinced that this builder from the North, who clearly radiates something of God's presence, and whose reading of the Scriptures sets your heart ablaze, is coming through your home town – and agrees to come and eat at your house. It is an enormous privilege – and you want to get it right. You want to express your gratitude to God for this ministry and for the whole of life. And so you are rather surprised when the Messiah pitches up, and fails to do something that is basic to any bible-believing Jew. He fails to express his appreciation for God's provision of food, he does not undergo the basic cleansing rituals before eating – he just tucks into his food as though he takes it for granted. And since this confuses you somewhat – you naturally raise an eyebrow!

And it seems to be the moment that Jesus has been waiting for. Noticing your surprise, he just launches into a venomous tirade about you, about your friends, about those who have devoted their lives to study and teach Scripture... The dinner guest from ... well, not from heaven you would think. And he just keeps going... where did all that come from? Wouldn't you love to have been there ... just to watch people's faces. Or taste the atmosphere – or hear the awkward silence. Who was the first person to speak next? What did they say. ('Anyone for Charades?') What on earth was going on?

Now, anyone that behaves like that in public is unlikely to see their opponents responds by saying – 'by golly – you're right – I need to change my ways'. The basic reaction to this kind of incident is naturally defensiveness. So more important than guessing what happened at the time – is to imagine what these people would have been thinking as they lay in bed at night. Would there be the angry response that this Jesus has misread you entirely. Or would you know in your bones that he was right?

He has accused you of getting all het up about unimportant things, whilst missing the major causes for concern. Of paying careful attention to tithing everything that comes your way – without actually being driven by a spirit of true justice. Maybe he is onto something, maybe

you have got so confident at your own passion, that you now are happy to force laws on others that actually work to their harm rather than their benefit!

According to the Guardian this week, this is precisely what the Catholic church have been doing. David Cameron has announced that he wants to place restrictions on legal terminations in the UK – and it is worth considering what the alternatives look like: The World Health Organisation estimates that every year, 65-70 thousand deaths result directly from home-made attempts at abortion in places where it is illegal. A further 5 million result in severe complications. But a study in the Lancet shows that there is no relationship between the legality of abortion, and it taking place. Women who do will do it regardless of the complications.

And what is more, there is strong evidence to suggest that in cultures where contraception is condemned, abortion runs highest. Of course, you cannot lay the blame for this entirely at the door of the Catholic church, which condemns the use of contraception. When you look at the figures, there are clearly many factors why abortion rates are higher in some places than in others. But it is difficult to deny that, at the very least, that most of the highest abortion rates and the horrors that accompany it – particularly in places like Kenya – happen to be in places where contraception and family planning are condemned because of Catholic beliefs.

So according to an article in the Guardian, we see in the Catholic church precisely the pharisaism we have read of in the Gospels. Those who, from positions of relative safety and comfort, imposing rules and morals upon people who suffer enormously when they struggle to live by those rules and morals.

Apparently the story looks something like this: When the Pope tells bishops in Kenya that they should defend traditional family values at all costs against agencies offering abortion, or when he travels to Brazil to denounce the government's contraceptive programme, he condemns women to death. When George Bush blocks US aid for family planning charities that promote safe abortions, he ensures, paradoxically, that contraceptives are replaced with backstreet foeticide. These people spread misery, disease and death. And they call themselves pro-life. Pharisaism in all its mind-numbingly glorious hypocrisy... fussing about liturgical correctness whilst condemning thousands to misery and death. Pharisaism, legalism ...

Or is it? A much more faithful example of Pharisaism is likely to be found in the way that we respond to hearing this sort of preaching, this kind of condemnation of others. I'm sure you didn't – but if you enjoyed hearing how these awful catholics are just like pharisees – that makes you infinitely more pharisaic. Pharisees tend to be people with whom we disagree – whereas – what Jesus seems to be getting at is something much closer to home.

When we think we have identified pharisaism in these ways, when we have framed it as a defined and limited picture – that has little to do with us – we have fallen straight into the trap that Jesus' fiercest opponents had fallen into. And that is precisely what we read in the text – the Scribes then pop up and say – hold on a minute Jesus, when you condemn them – you're condemning us as well ... instead of just condemning the pharisees as a movement – he had got to the underlying cause of the problem. In the way that he had condemned the pharisees – their sin was not just a blip that was peculiar to them, it was rather something that others were guilty of as well. So Jesus launches into his next tirade. And as a father of four, I dare to say I think I know something of what he was up to :

In fact, my relationship with my children converges quite closely in places with Jesus' relationship with the Pharisees.

If you spend any time in the company of me and my children – you might notice how much of the time they spend telling me how bad the others are. Daddy, he just said – Daddy – he just hit me – Daddy she's not sharing – Daddy look what he just did. And there was a point yesterday, when this went on for about 2 minutes and I couldn't get a word in edgeways – they were addressing me ... but I couldn't say a thing to them because they were too busy telling me how naughty the others were and how innocent they were.

It doesn't mean that they are not in communion with me – they obviously believe that these things are paramount for me. It is not that they are ignoring me – the whole point is that they are addressing the real me. And this, it seems to me, is the point of the Pharisees – they have the childish habit (which most of us probably learn to hide rather than outgrow), the childish habit of wanting to see others get their just deserts. But not me... because I'm good.

And many of the Pharisees were genuinely grateful for this. I saw Seth this week, and he spoke about religious bigotry as a sin that infects us all. And he quoted this parable – of the Pharisee and the tax collector in the temple. The Pharisee who was praying to God, and who was genuinely grateful that he was not like the tax collector. But the point is that whatever the Pharisee was doing, he was not listening to God. God, it seems, couldn't get a word in edgeways.

And that is the locus of the pharisees' hypocrisy. That of all people in Israel they were the ones who exemplified faithfulness, worship, and listening to God – and horror of horrors – they were not doing it. They were neglecting love and neglecting justice, and Jesus describes them as unmarked graves.

That is the biggest insult imaginable to a Pharisee – because walking over a grave would make you ritually impure. So unmarked graves make you become impure without you realising it. The Pharisee, sticklers for religious purity, are being told that they themselves are the cause of moral impurity in others.

We are all Pharisees. We all claim to be different, we all claim to