

## Newsletter for Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> August 2021

Dear Friends,

It's not always easy to identify as a Christian in contemporary culture, or to associate ourselves with the church. We're aware of all kinds of criticisms and accusations that are levelled against religious belief in our times - whether it's the idea that God is just a childish fantasy, a pathetic delusion, or, as Christopher Hitchens put it, that 'religion poisons everything' and leads people to do terrible things to one another. Some of these views are quite extreme, and not that widely shared. But one of the most common and difficult charges to shrug off is that of hypocrisy. It seems that, in the eyes of many people today, to be a person of faith is, almost by definition, to be a hypocrite - saying one thing and doing another.

And, unfortunately, in recent years there's been no shortage of evidence to back up this claim. The newspapers and media have regularly been dominated by horrendous stories of abusive priests and corrupt religious institutions, evangelists on the make, and Christian leaders and apologists whose public utterances and moral stances have been shown to be completely at odds with their personal lifestyles and behaviour.

Anyone who is looking for a bit of relief from these criticisms, or reassurance that the accusation of hypocrisy is not all that serious, is likely to be disappointed by Sunday's Bible readings. They all deal quite explicitly with the question of authenticity: does the way that we live actually line up with what we say we believe?

In Deuteronomy 4, Moses is giving instructions to the people of Israel as they are about to enter the Promised Land. We know from the previous chapter that Moses is aware that he will not be allowed to go with them, so he is teaching them about the 'statutes and ordinances' by which they are to live. He is reminding them of what it is - and who it is - to which they have committed themselves as a people. And he is very clear that these are no mere rules or abstract principles, but actions that flow out of the closest possible relationship: 'For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him?' (v.7) Their behaviour should be nothing less than their response to God, and they are to pass on what they know about this one who is 'so near', to their children and to future generations.

The whole of the prophetic tradition throughout the Bible - in the Old Testament and the New - flows out of this fundamental teaching of Moses, that God wants His people to live in His presence and to care about the things that matter to Him. They are called upon not only to believe in God but to act in a way that bears witness to God's character. The epistle of James is taking up this same theme when it declares that 'Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world' (Ja.1:27). The believer must be a doer of the Word and not just a hearer (v.22).

Nowhere in the Bible is hypocrisy challenged more clearly or forcefully than in the gospels. Long before the New Atheists or the modern critics of religion launched their accusations, Jesus, standing firmly in the prophetic tradition, identified hypocrisy as the besetting temptation and sin of religious people. In Mark 7 he declared that 'Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines"' (vv.6,7). Jesus reminded his listeners of what we are told over and over again in Scripture, that God is concerned not merely with outward religious observance but with the genuine love and service of human hearts. To give the appearance of religious seriousness while ignoring God's presence, character and commands, is nothing other than hypocrisy.

It's a challenging message for Christians in any age, but especially for us today. Few of us are strangers to hypocrisy. We know what goes on in the secret places of our minds and the distance between what we say and what we often do. And yet we know that there is no authentic Christian

life and witness without prayer and attention to the things that matter to God. We constantly need His forgiveness and grace to live the life to which we are called. And this is indeed promised to us as followers of Jesus Christ. Martin Luther King was fond of quoting the words of an old African American man in his congregation:

'We aint what we wanna be.  
We aint what we oughta be.  
We aint what we gonna be.  
But thank God, we aint what we was.'

Whatever the challenges of being Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there's no question that we're called to pass this faith on, to share what we have discovered to be true and real, to make it known to our children and our children's children.

On 16<sup>th</sup> September we are starting the Alpha course for the whole of the Garth Ministry Area. Alpha is a free 10 week course for people who are interested in finding out more about the basics of the Christian faith in a relaxed, no-pressure environment. Each week includes a meal, a short film and an open discussion about God and the deep questions of our lives.

Alpha courses are run by churches of many different denominations not only in the UK but in countries right across the world. They are a beautiful way to extend hospitality to friends, family and neighbours and introduce them, perhaps for the very first time, to the person of Jesus Christ and to the good news of the Christian faith.

Alpha has played an important part in the journeys of faith and spiritual discovery of many, many people. Please help us to get the word out - and give some thought as to who you could invite. There is more information on the website: <https://radyr.org.uk/parish/alpha-course/>

If you would like to help run the course - setting up, preparing food, and making our guests feel welcome - Amanda and I would love to hear from you, so please get in touch.

And above all, please pray for this venture, for our guests and for all who will help to lead it. In the words of our collect for today;

Almighty God, who called your Church to bear witness that you were in Christ reconciling the world to yourself: help us to proclaim the good news of your love, that all who hear it may be drawn to you; through him who was lifted up on the cross, and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen

Yours in Christ,

Iwan Russell-Jones  
[iwan.russelljones@virginmedia.com](mailto:iwan.russelljones@virginmedia.com) , 07905 400688