

Person Centred Church – Person Centred Teaching

Galatians 1:6-9; 4:8-20 / Matthew 23:1-32

A few days ago in Tesco I noticed the tag line on Walker's *Sensations* crisps: "Made with real ingredients." You have to ask what the alternatives might be - "made with imaginary ingredients" "made with pretend ingredients" "made with virtual ingredients". I wondered how it would be possible to make real crisps *without* using real ingredients. What are the building blocks of reality? Or as Pontius Pilate asked, "**What is truth?**"

In 1993 Gordon Kuhrt edited a small book called "Doctrine Matters" in which one contributor wrote that doctrine matters because doctrine "aims to tell the truth about things." The truth is what we need in all things, for as Jesus said, "**You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.**" (John 8:32. In saying this, Jesus was referring to his own doctrine or teaching, and contrasting it with that of the Pharisees. So today I want to consider Jesus' doctrine – that teaching of truth which sets us free. We're looking at it in the context of my vision for a person-centred church, and I want to show how Jesus' teaching is person-centred teaching. First of all I'm going to look at Jesus' fury with the teachers of his day; then I'm going to look at some hallmarks of Jesus' teaching, and finally offer a simple test for teaching in the church today.

Jesus' Fury

Jesus was someone who constantly broke the rules and undermined the religious teachings of his time. Yes – he *claimed* he hadn't come to abolish the law, but it can't have looked like that to anyone else – least of all to the teachers. On one occasion he angrily explained his apparent breaking of the Sabbath laws by saying "**Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to take it?**" (Mk 3:4)

Time and again Jesus exposed the religious teachings of his day as being self-serving, oppressive, and missing the whole point of God's intention. But of course this hasn't stopped us, his followers in the church, from falling into the same trap again and again over the centuries. We're just as prone to sin as were the Pharisees of Jesus' day. Earlier this week there was a brilliant documentary on BBC2 called "Trouble in Amish Paradise" about two families breaking out of oppressive religious rules and systems because they'd discovered that most of those rules weren't even in the Bible. Yet the Amish started out as a Protestant sect seeking freedom and refuge from oppression themselves.

And you don't have to look only to the more unusual churches to find teachings that constrain life rather than release it – whether they're explicitly laid out and codified or simply embodied in the culture, the worship, the attitudes. Women, the poor or poorly educated, those suffering in mind or body, the doubters, the meek, people who question things, these are people typically oppressed through religious teaching.

The Woes in Matthew 23

In Matthew 23 Jesus goes on a real rant against the teachers of his day. What does he say about them?

First, in v.4 he says they “**tie up heavy loads and lay them on people's backs without lifting a finger to move them.**” In other words they make life heavy – too hard for already burdened people. In v.5 he says “**Everything they do is done for people to see... they love to have people call them Rabbi.**” In other words they use these teachings to maintain their own position over people – it's all about power. In v.13 he says, “**You shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces.**” In other words, their teachings tell people they're not good enough, not worthy enough, not pure enough – what an ugly representation of a welcoming God. In v.15 he describes them as predatory, like death and hell seeking to swallow innocent people up.

In vv.16-22 he calls them “**blind guides**” because they can't see the wood for the trees; they don't understand the implications of what they're doing; they practice religion but they forget about God who sits on the throne of heaven. It's a *Person* they should be aware of rather than a set of rules – but they can only see the laws they themselves have set. In vv.23-24 he shows how they “**neglect the important matters of the law – justice mercy and faithfulness**” because they're obsessed with little practices. Note that the issues Jesus upholds all relate to people. In vv.25-28 he shows how they're fanatical about what's on the outside with no understanding of what goes on in the inside of the heart – not their own hearts of darkness nor anyone else's. They've long since given up on understanding people. In vv.29-32 he shows how they applaud the prophets and heroes of Scripture while at the same time ignoring the message of those prophets. What was that message about? Consistently it was a message about the reality of God as a person and the real lives of the people around – people whose lives mattered.

So why was Jesus so furious with the religious teachers of his day? Was it simply because they differed from him? Was it because they were misrepresenting God's word? I put it to you that Jesus was furious because of the way their religious teachings consistently oppressed *people*. Time and again Jesus broke the rules and angered the authorities, touched the untouchables, spoke to the shunned, welcomed the sinner because they were *people* who needed release, joy, salvation. Jesus embodies person-centred teaching.

So let's move on then, to consider some of the hallmarks of Jesus' own teaching.

Hallmarks of Jesus' Teaching

*First of all, there's the **principle of life.***

Throughout the Bible the imperative to save, preserve and build life is hammered home time and again. Joseph interprets his captivity in Egypt as having the purpose “**to save lives**” (Gen 45:5); Esther has a duty to save the lives of her people; Daniel acts to save the lives of his Babylonian colleagues; Jonah is rebuked because he didn't understand God's desire to save the lives of the dreaded people of Nineveh. Life is sacred. And Jesus said, “**Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to take it?**” (Mk 3:4)

Jesus' teaching, in word and action, gives life - not just literal life and death – but spiritual, mental, emotional life. Some religious teachings keep people down – they stunt life and cramp expression. No-one can live life to the full if they're crippled with fear, but some church teachings are heavy with assurances of punishment and hell – they weigh people down, and take away life. Jesus said, **“I have come that you might have life - and have it to the full.”** (John 10:10)

Need for Light

Secondly, there's the need for light. Psalm 119 says **“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”** (Ps 119:105). God said through Isaiah about the coming of salvation, **“I will turn the darkness into light before them.”** (Isa 42:16) Centuries later he said something similar about John the Baptist, through the words of Zechariah:

“And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.” (Lk 1:76-79) Notice the connections here between darkness and death, but also between salvation, forgiveness, mercy, rising sun, guidance, and peace.

Jesus said of himself **“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life... I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness.”** (John 8:12, 12:46) One of the issues that came up in the documentary I watched earlier this week was that a ruling of the church said that Amish people were only allowed to have Bibles written in their original language in antiquated German. But none of them could understand it! The teaching kept the people in darkness and it needed dismantling. Light empowers people. If you're trying to get anywhere in the dark you stumble, you fall, you give up. Teachings that keep people in darkness have no place in the church, but Jesus' teaching always gives light, and light empowers people.

Discovery of Freedom

But people who are empowered want freedom. That's my third hallmark of Jesus' teaching. What's the point in having power if you don't have the freedom in which to exercise it? Again, going back to the documentary I watched, the discovery of freedom was one of the great joys discovered by those two families who rebelled against their church's teaching. The trouble with leaders in all areas of life is that we become intoxicated with the love of telling people what to do, how to live and so on. We exercise our power at the expense of other people's freedom – but that's not Jesus' way.

From start to finish the Bible is about freedom. In Exodus God says **“I have heard the cry of my people... and am coming down to bring them out.”** (Ex.3) Luke 13 describes Jesus healing a woman who had been crippled for eighteen years, bent over and unable to straight up to see the sky.

As he placed his hands on her he said, **“Woman you are set free”** (Lk 13:12) and when some of the teachers complained that the Sabbath was being spoiled by this moment of work he said, **“You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?”** (vv.16-17)

Freedom! Without boundaries it's overwhelming, but so often through history religious people have become obsessed with laying those boundaries down. The pharisees of Jesus' time described the Law of Moses as a boundary. They said, we mustn't let this boundary be harmed, so let's put other ones around it, just to be doubly safe. These boundaries are based on fear, but Jesus doesn't want us to live in fear. He said, **“If the Son sets you free you will be free indeed.”** Jesus wants us to live boldly, freely, joyfully. That's what God's umbrella of grace is there for – so we can take the risks of freedom. St Paul, writing to Christians in Galatia, Turkey, says, **“For freedom Christ has set us free.”**

Quality of Service

My final hallmark of Jesus' teaching is *service*. Jesus often taught about himself – in fact of all the world's major religious leaders it's one of the things that marks him out. Mohammed, the Buddha, Moses, Guru Nanak all pointed away from themselves and said, *“This is the way”* But Jesus said, **“I am the way.”** (Jn 14:6) Yet Jesus' teaching, in word and deed, pointed to him as a servant. **“The Son of Man,”** he said, **“did not come to be served but to serve.”** (Mk 10:45) Time and upheld the value of service is upheld: **“Whoever wants to be first must be the servant of all.”** (Mk 10:44) Whether in his relationship with God or others, Jesus lived a life of joyful service.

“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” he said, (Mk 2:27). In other words all our teachings need to be about how people are best served – because that's how God is served. Jesus said, **“Whatever you do for the least of these, you did it also for me.”** (Matt. 25:40)

A Simple Test – What does this do to People?

And so I want to draw to a close by offering a simple test for teaching in the church today, which you can take away and apply in any situation. In fact it works beyond the church as well: use it to evaluate the teachings of our culture, or of any philosophy, or the attitudes of those around you, those in control, those who make the rules, yourself perhaps, the people you work for. This test is so simple but so revealing – it's a tool you can keep in your pocket and it's the basic test tool for all person-centred teaching.

The test is one simple question: *“What does this do to people?”* That's all you need to ask. Does it set them free or keep them in fear? Does it shed light or cover with darkness? Does it bring life in all its fullness, or does it stunt life? All of Jesus' teaching is person-centred teaching. It's all about what happens to people: are they brought close to God, enabled to relate to him, or are they kept away from God? It's all about relationship within God the Trinity. Again and again the test that works is, *“What does this do to people?”* Let me expand on that briefly:

Some Diagnostic Questions

A diagnostic question is a question that helps you understand what's going on – the sort of question your doctor asks when she's trying to make sense of the symptoms you're presenting. Diagnostic questions to ask about teaching include things like:

Does it build fear or confidence? There are a lot of dubious teachings about demons and evil spirits that magnify fear and leave people more vulnerable to superstition than ever.

Does it bring hopelessness and condemnation? There are many mis-teachings, for example on divorce and remarriage, that hold people scandalously under a hopeless condemnation.

Does it disable people from taking their rightful place in the church – there are many destructive teachings on women that do that.

Does it perpetuate a faulty or mean view of God's grace? There are teachings on suicide which I believe to be quite evil, that do that.

Does it build an unlikely picture of the world – suggesting that it's "known" "factual" and "Biblical" when in reality it's imagined, tenuous, and based on scattered Bible verses? Many teachings do this, and then bind people into an unreal world view.

Does it bring release in Christ? Does it enable you to serve Christ? Does it build faith in Christ? Does it magnify God's grace? Does it encourage you to live confidently with the *unknown*?

Test Everything

So to apply: "Test everything. Hold on to what is good" wrote St Paul to the Thessalonian Church. (1 Thess. 5:21)

You might use that test on yourself: something you're doing or saying – in other words a teaching you're living by – it might just be an attitude or a decision you've made: "What is it doing to people?" What's it doing to your children, your colleagues, your loved ones? Today you could ask Jesus for the strength and self-awareness to revise that teaching.

You might use that test on something that's been said to you – a teaching or belief or attitude you were brought up with, or always thought the church stood for, or that God taught – something that was perhaps held over you. "What was it doing to you as a person?" Maybe it was more harmful than you thought. Some teachings given in church, even by devout Christians, are evil – propounded through fear and ignorance. Today you could ask Jesus for the strength and courage to reject that teaching.

You might use that test on something that's commonly held in the culture around you – whether in church, at work, in your community. Maybe it's the culture of workplace demands, or consumerism, or sexism, or bullying. What does it do to people? Today you could ask Jesus for the strength and wisdom to challenge that teaching or those attitudes.

What is it doing to people? It's a "Jesus question" for Jesus people.