

“Hypocrites!” Jesus uses the word like a recurring thunder-clap. You would think from listening to Matthew's Gospel that all Pharisees and all scribes at the time of Jesus were really nasty people. Jesus lays into them. They are hypocrites, they are all show with their long tassels and elegant head gear, making sure they are seen by everybody in the VIP seats they take. 'Hypocrite' comes from a word meaning 'actor'. They are playing a part and sincerity has no part of it. Jesus denunciation is prolonged, taking up most of chapter 23. Who are these people?

The scribes were a professional literate class. The expertise in reading and writing would have been handed down from father to son. As kingship developed so writing became necessary for keeping records for trade and taxation. Kings require armies and payments must be recorded. Kings need to write to other kings to conduct diplomacy and threaten war or sue for peace. And so a scribal class emerged and quickly made itself indispensable. Matthew himself was very likely a scribe by training.

The Pharisees were a group of lay people who sought to live lives according to the strict rules of purity that pertained in the Temple. So they were scrupulous about being ritual clean themselves and only touching objects which were clean. Consequently, to ensure there were no mistakes, they ate only with other Pharisees. Unlike the highly conservative Sadducees, many of whose members were priests and high priests, the Pharisees were forward looking, accepting, alongside the written Law handed down to Moses on Mount Sinai, and contained in the sacred words of the Torah, they accepted an oral Law given at the same time. This allowed innovation, like the idea of a general resurrection of the righteous at the end of time.

The people looked upon the Pharisees with awe. They were models of piety.

Jesus had disputes with Pharisees, but they were not in any way involved with his arrest and execution. That was manipulated by Caiaphas, the High Priest and a Sadducee. In Luke's Gospel we hear about some Pharisees warning Jesus about the plottings against him of the devious Herod, ruler in Galilee. Jesus calls him 'that fox', referring not to his cunning but to his rapacious nature. Foxes kill the hens for fun, not just for food.

Not all Pharisees can be considered bad people. So why is Jesus so swinging in his criticisms of them?

Matthew, a Jewish Christian, is writing for a largely Jewish congregation in the eighties, perhaps in a large city like Antioch in Syria. Jerusalem has been destroyed

by the Roman army of Vespasian and his son Titus. The Temple was burnt to the ground and the sacred objects carried off to Rome as war booty. A religion that was built on the need to offer sacrifice to God each day, as well as countless other sacrifices, a faith that called its men to come to Jerusalem three times each year for major festivals, had lost its foundations.

It was the rabbis, the successors of the Pharisees who transformed the Jewish religion into a religion of the Word, whose meeting places would be in local communities which would be called synagogues. It was a painful time of transformation amid uncertainty and insecurity. At the same time as the Jewish faith was facing this total upheaval, and was fighting for its survival, a new faith was emerging from the same Jewish roots. The followers of Jesus of Nazareth claimed he was the long-awaited Messiah, and gave him the blasphemous title 'Son of God'.

Although they emerged from the same background, perhaps because of this, the two groups were distrustful of each other and that wariness could break out into violence. Christians were banned from worship in the synagogue and a 'blessing' was added to a daily recited prayer which cursed Christians. These things were happening as Matthew is composing his Gospel. He puts on Jesus' lips words of condemnation of the Pharisees which were aimed at the Jewish leaders of his day.

Sadly the ill feeling was to last nineteen hundred years, and words of healing were only finally spoken at the Second Vatican Council. In *Nostra Aetate* there is a brief but ground-breaking reference by the Council Fathers to the fact that only a few Jews were responsible for Jesus' condemnation; most at the time in that place were not culpable, and nor were any others. Our relationship with many Jewish leaders and lay people has blossomed, and our relearning of the wisdom of the Jewish Rabbis of antiquity continues.

Hypocrisy is not confined to any one group. Every news' bulletin shows that to be the case. It should be a question we ask of ourselves in an examination of conscience every day.