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My Inner Pharisee

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

As I was hanging around in the airport in Glasgow waiting to fly to Dublin, I found myself hovering in the bookshop. Airport bookshops seem to delight in particular things. Travel books, obviously but also self help books. Endless self help books. You know the kind of thing – *The Road Less Travelled, Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway, Women who Run with the Wolves, I'm OK, You're OK*. You know the kind of thing. Some of them are helpful, some of them are silly.

Well, I'm thinking of going into the business with a book for those shelves. It has got the following chapter titles:

- Piety for pilgrims
- How to be good
- Know right from wrong
- How to mix politics and religion...in a good way
- Learning more and more about God every day.
- A radical approach to living the good life.

And it is going to be called *My Inner Pharisee*.

You see, the Pharisees get rather a bad press in the New Testament. We are so used to them being derided as the baddies in the story that we tend to lump them all together with the Sadducees as a bad lot who were out to get Jesus. We must surely be against anyone who was against Himself, after all. Mustn't we?

Yet part of the truth about the Pharisees is that a lot of what they said was pretty good. Indeed a number of Jesus' own followers came from the group called the Pharisees. There

were people who had formerly been Pharisees who began to follow Jesus. There were people who turned their eyes in God's direction as a result of an encounter with the one we know as Lord.

The most obvious example of this is Paul of Tarsus himself, whom we heard being gentle and kind this morning to the Thessalonians.

In this morning's Gospel reading, the Pharisees turn up because they had heard that Jesus had confounded the Sadducees when they turned up to try to catch him out. (Anyone who beat the Sadducees was worth listening to if you were a Pharisee)

And if we need a reminder of the difference between the Pharisees and the Sadducees (and even if we don't) I simply remind you that the Pharisees believed in life after death and the Sadducees didn't. That's why they were sad you see. (I feel that I should repent of that in a city that gave us Oscar Wilde).

I don't think that this was necessarily particularly malicious of Jesus to take on the Pharisees – they kind of liked it – the Pharisees liked their theology and liked a good argument. To an extent, in that religious world, you did not only exercise your religion by going to worship God – you also were religious by going to listen to people like this debate, or if you were a man and in a position of some power, you joined in the debate for yourself.

Interestingly, I have a colleague who is on sabbatical at the moment in Jerusalem having all kinds of interfaith encounters and he posted a picture of young rabbis training this week and doing so by having one to one debates. Lots

of them. All going on at once all over a large room. Debate. Debate. Debate.

It might be an odd thought that listening to people argue might have been a way for people to get in touch with God. But it is worth thinking about. One of the great truths that the Jewish people seem to know instinctively and which Christians so seldom seem to grasp is that there are different ideas, lots of different ideas about God. And one of the ways of getting in touch with those ideas is to argue and discuss and debate.

Nothing, after all, could be more important than talking about God and how to live in God's world. The Pharisees, with their intense love of debate at least teach us that civilised debate is possible amongst God's people. They may even teach us that it is necessary. Required even.

So they come to Jesus and receive back from him some of their own teaching. Which commandment is the greatest they say? Just the kind of thing to get the kids going in the Young Pharisees Summer Club. Which commandment is the greatest?

His answer is to throw back at them some of the teaching which they most revered (from the book of Deuteronomy) and put his own spin on it – “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and your neighbour as yourself.” But he did not leave it there.

I know a good preacher in Scotland who has a habit of announcing his text at the start of a sermon, then he repeats it again. Then he says it once more loudly and slowly. Then we hear it one final time and he adds a bit on the end. Then he preaches on the bit that he has added at the end.

Rabbi Jesus was a good preacher and he does something similar today. He says, “You shall love the Lord your God and your neighbour as yourself” –and then he adds a bit – “on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

And that is the bit, the bit he added that we must think about today.

For in the bit he added, he looks at the old rule books and turns them inside out. For he saw them not in terms of which rules could be kept and which should not but in terms of the motives of those keeping them. He told them that it was all about Love.

It was my birthday this week. When I was born, some 51 years ago, the Beatles were singing, “Love, love, love, all you need is love.”

It was a song the young rabbi would have known all the words to.

I happen to be in Dublin at the moment because Changing Attitude Ireland asked me here to talk about how Anglicans in Scotland have come to the point of agreeing that those of us who wish to do so can marry same-sex couples. For now, those same-sex couples who wish to marry, can walk down the aisles of our churches hand in hand and make promises before their friends, their priest and before God.

It is something of an irony to me that you've asked me to preach on the only day in the three year lectionary when you read Leviticus. A book not widely known except for one or two verses which are said, incorrectly I think, to speak of gay people as an abomination. (Verses which incidentally are never read in church).

How are we to read these texts of old?

“Love, love, love, love is all you need,” for working out how to take these old rule books. And it is not me saying so, it is the Lord. Love the Lord your God and love your neighbour as yourself and all will be well.

It is my heartfelt belief that no one is an abomination before God.

It is my heartfelt belief that everyone is made in the image and likeness of God.

It is my heartfelt belief that everyone is included in the love of God.

In the end, if you want to know how to read Leviticus or any of the biblical texts, prophecy or law, it all comes down to Love.

For God loves us. Gay and straight, men and women, those who fall into neat categories and those who don't.

I believe that God loves me. And from that position I dare to say here in Dublin today, that God loves you.

God loves you.

In the name of God, Creator, Saviour and Liberator.

Amen.