

THE INSIDE STORY

Matthew 23

The passage in Matthew that we read this morning is a scary one--especially for Presbyterians--for we are inclined to think rather well of ourselves--being respectable and all that. The background of the verse is something like this:

When Jesus was a boy , I am certain he used to witness every year on the 15th day of the month of Adar, a curious custom of the pious. Here, there, and indeed everywhere their ancestors were buried, you could see them bending over the graves, with their buckets of chalk water, busily whitewashing the tombs in time for Passover, so that pilgrims would not inadvertently walk on them and be defiled. As Jesus later recalled, this made the graves "outwardly appear beautiful". But the older he got and the better acquainted he became with the religious of his day, the more convinced he was that they themselves were precisely like those "whitewashed tombs". So that whenever he saw a proper gathering of "scribes and pharisees" in the synagogue on the Sabbath, they looked to him for all the world like those rows and rows of well-scrubbed grave stones, so tidy, so neat, so clean, so white, so ready to pass inspection for Passover--but "within"? Even as a boy, Jesus must have had enough imagination to know that all that "whitewash" on the outside, to prevent pollution of the pious, did not change a thing on the other side of those tombs. Even then , he knew that within they were full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. When he was a lad, he must have wrinkled his nose and shuddered at the contrast between the whitewashed outside and the corrupt inside. And now that he was a grown man--it was the religious themselves who made him shudder and wrinkle his nose--for they were themselves like walking graves: on the outside, so neat and tidy, so clean, so white, and polished, so ready to pass inspection for Passover--but..."within"? Ah the other side was something else again: "So", he said," you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity"--the great cover-up of polite society.

He was, with a bit of wit, calling them "walking coffins, the casket crew" --fancy and foul. All their pretense at pleasing God on the Sabbath, all their posing and posturing in public meeting, made him shudder, made him desperately sick. For they were not his enemies; they were his friends, his people. Scribes and Pharisees were supposed to be "guides" in the faith, the holy family. He didn't hate them, not his own people. He loved them. That was the

660501 Page 1

trouble. He loved them and only wanted them to love God as a father and love one another as a family: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem," he wept, "Killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!"

It is a very sad thing to love people who despise one another, and finally despise you because they don't want to be kind as you want them to: "This is my command," said Jesus, "That you love one another." Not that "ye love me" or "help me" or "do for me"--that wasn't Jesus' plea: just that "ye love one another", yet that seemed so revolutionary to them, so upsetting; they, being stubborn, pig-headed, would not. Poor Jesus--it's a good thing he never felt sorry for himself. He would have fled long before they ran him out of town on that split-rail of a cross, and killed him .

Strange thing about Jesus: he never thought of himself as the one who was in charge; for he had this sense of being the one who was alive, alive to all that was best in life, alive to the eternal values, the plain, good life, the life of love--which never ends. So he was not afraid, except for them--for the religious, who were already dead (dead to good, dead to their fellows, dead even to their own best life) and did not know it.

On the outside--they were impeccable to the death, all proper, all polish (the right people, the right places, everything so "persnickity" but on the other side? That was a different story. They were dead at heart, and didn't know what they were missing: No warm human sympathies among them, no gentle affections between them, no real caring for their poor, no kindness for the outcast, no life sharing--no laughter, in short, no heart. So Jesus tried to teach them what was to them, a very peculiar form of piety, Namely this: that if you are lacking in humanity, you are lacking in divinity. He tried to tell them that if you are malicious you cannot be religious, that unless you are kind (loving "mercy, justice, and good faith") then its all "show" "this religion bit", shame enough to make God shudder, make him sick. Jesus knew religious people without a heart are dangerous, but he wasn't afraid for himself. Their other side only made him afraid for them. For he knew, that in this life, as in the life to come, its a choice: love or perish. He said to them: "Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate".

I remember a man and wife. Early on they were not poor, but they were a lot poorer and a lot happier. They loved one another at the start, and God smiled and gave them children and that was all that mattered. That was enough. But not for long. They wanted to up-grade the outside of their life. They wanted it all just right. They planned that someday, people, the right people, would stand in front of their place, and say "Behold, your house is.....", and they would beam with purest pride. But as they began to build up the outside of their life, the other side -- the inside began to fall apart. I don't know why: Resentment of those who stayed one jump ahead of them? Bitterness toward those who did not accept them? Disillusionment with friends who weren't friends, only social and business connections? Weariness with too much too late in life? A surfeit of sweets? As I said, I do not know. I only know they began to fall out of love--first with life. Nothing pleased them--not--ever--neither the government nor the maid. They even fell out of love with people they didn't know for reasons they didn't have. They inadvertently taught their children to also be (...) (...). You see--you can't contain malice. It has all (...). It's infectious (like here) It spreads. So, having fallen out of love with the world in general, they soon added their friends, especially their old friends, especially the ones who did not agree with them. Their family came next, of course. Then the inevitable happened. They fell out of love with each other, and lived more or less miserably together ever after--their dislikes binding them together, blaming God for the grand debacle they had made of it: "Behold your house now" said Jesus, "It is forsaken and desolate".

And there's only one way to change, to correct, to rewrite the story: "For I tell you" said Jesus, "you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord'."

Let us Pray

O Lord Christ, teach us religious, all neat with out, not neat within, that we'll never see a moment's peace again, not in the town of men, not in our own homes, not in our hearts, that we will not see any more pure joy, gentle laughter, no more mercy, justice, or good faith, until we see thee once again, our God, face to face, and facing up to ourselves, become what thou alone can enable us to be: good men and women, kind men and women, warm of heart, helping of hand, no longer stingy with our life, no longer afraid of living it or losing it, being no longer afraid to love, as thou lovest us. Amen

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