

Today's gospel reading is of course about the one thing that Jesus couldn't abide: hypocrisy. In many places in the gospels he castigates the hypocrites:

In Matthew, he says to the Pharisees:

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to..."

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You cross land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a child of hell as you are..."

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside, but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and every uncleanness. In the same way, on the outside you appear to be righteous, but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness."

Individuals who were weak or sinful but honest about it, Jesus forgave at once and sometimes revealed himself to them in a most unlikely way. In the gospel of John, Jesus sits down at the well of Samaria with a Samaritan woman who has had five husbands and is now living over the brush with someone else; yet to her, Jesus says directly and unambiguously: "I am the Messiah. You are looking at him."

The evangelist must have written this through gritted teeth in order to record the truth. A Samaritan – who were

considered the lowest of the low by Jews? And a woman – whose testimony was not acceptable in a court of law because she was considered too unreliable? But the woman was not a hypocrite – that is, she didn't pretend to be something she wasn't. And what about the woman caught in the act of adultery? Or the prostitute who washed and anointed his feet? They didn't pretend to be anything other than they were either.

A hypocrite is someone who pretends to be better than others. In today's parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector:

“The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people — robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector here. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

We shouldn't point out other people's faults whilst hiding our own. We shouldn't accuse our brother or sister of something when we are guilty of far worse. All these things, including hypocrisy, starts within. As Jesus himself says, a good tree will produce good fruit, but a bad tree will produce

bad fruit. St Thomas Aquinas, many centuries later, said: 'As a person is, so shall he do.' Most of us, most of the time, are a mixture of the two; we can be good trees who sometimes produce bad fruit, or bad trees who sometimes produce good fruit. That's how life is for us, that's the kind of creatures we are: there isn't any good human being who hasn't at some time or another in his life done a couple of bad things... and there isn't any bad person who hasn't at some time or another in his life done a couple of good things. All we have to do is not to pretend that we are better than who we really are and who other people are. I think hypocrisy actually made Jesus physically sick.

The antidote to hypocrisy is gratitude. If in the depths of our heart we say 'My Lord, thank you for my life and my being' when we wake up, at midday, and when we go to bed, we will not fall into hypocrisy. Meister Eckhart said: "If the only prayer you ever say is 'thank you' that will be enough."