

The one thing above all that Jesus could not abide and always spoke against is hypocrisy. In today's gospel reading, he turns on the scribes and Pharisees again – especially pointing out the way they allow themselves to be seen and addressed. A phylactery was a small leather box containing Hebrew texts on vellum, worn by Jewish men at morning prayer as a reminder to keep the law. The fact that the scribes and Pharisees wore broader, large phylacteries than others, suggested they knew more about the law and the scriptures than anyone else.

He says in the same chapter of Matthew's gospel:

“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.”

The point is this: that individuals who were weak or sinful but honest about it, Jesus forgave and sometimes revealed himself to them in a most unlikely way... like the woman at the well of Samaria, 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 scatter-brained? But the woman was not a hypocrite – that is, she didn't pretend to be something she wasn't. And Jesus loved her for that.

A hypocrite is someone who pretends to be better than others. Like the Pharisee in the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. While the Pharisee boasts about his piety, the tax collector beats his breast with shame and regret. Jesus loved him for that too.

We shouldn't point out other people's faults whilst not acknowledging our own. We shouldn't accuse our brother or sister of something when we are guilty of worse.

All these things, including hypocrisy, starts within. St Thomas Aquinas 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.

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."