

Donnybrook

15 March 2022

Welcome

In the readings for Lent, the confrontations between Jesus and his contemporaries can be quite sharp. This is especially the case for week 5. We have an example in today's Gospel. There is a risk of falling into a kind of easy anti-Judaism, the fore-runner of the later lethal anti-Semitism.

Topic

There are three reasons and even four why we should not take that step.

Steps

The first is easy: Jesus and the Pharisees are having what we may call robust Jewish argument. It is an inner-family debate, not a clash between mortal enemies. In fact, the Pharisees have nothing whatsoever to do with the death of Jesus – their power base was not in Jerusalem but in the countryside. Jesus lays into them for hypocrisy – a charge found widely in the prophets of Israel, as in today's first reading.

The second point is this. When Matthew was writing, a split with the mother religion had already taken place. This was a painful separation and it led to a very sharp attitude towards the mother religion. At the same time, Matthew is speaking to his own church. Clearly, they are doing the things he wishes to condemn. There is no need to forbid what is not happening!!! So, the evangelist's lens is focused not just on the Pharisees but also on the disciples, the church at the time of writing. In Matthew's day, there was an emerging church, with emerging structures. With the emerging structure came prestige and power – and Matthew is as much against his fellow disciples as he is against his fellow Pharisees.

The third follows. In the history of the church, the temptation to prestige and power has been very strong. Nell McCafferty once reported the consecration of a new Archbishop. Rather wickedly, she did it as a fashion report, mentioning watered silk and matching accessories. There can indeed be a great deal of show and display, leading to a gap between what is said and what is done.

Conclusion

So far, so much other people. Neither Matthew nor Isaiah would be happy for us to leave it at that. Instead, both Isaiah and Matthew would have us all have the courage to turn the lens on ourselves and see ourselves honestly and clearly. Only then will true conversion of heart be possible.