**Matthew 23:1-12 Who is in your grandstand?**

I’m sure if we spent some time reminiscing, each one of us would be able to remember things that were said to us at times that really made a difference to the way we looked at or even lived our lives; the comment of a teacher perhaps, or a minister or even a parent.

When I think back to my years at theological college, I have one such memory. The college I attended brought out from the USA a well-known counsellor, lecturer and author called Dr Arch Hart. Much of Hart’s work was amongst clergy.

Dr Hart presented a two week intensive on how to last the distance in ministry. It was brilliant! One thing he said that really struck me, and which has stayed with me, was the question, “who is in your grandstand?” He was using a baseball metaphor. He said that often a player would be conscious of certain people in the grandstand, for instance a scout from another team, or some other person of importance to him, and it would affect the way he played. His focus would be on the person in the grandstand, and on how he looked and performed in that person’s eyes, and his attention would not be entirely on his game.

Hart said that sometimes Christians were like that – particularly Christians in leadership – and it could affect the integrity of their service for Christ. The question he had for us theological students was whether we were doing things in our ministry with a view to making an impression, or were we simply serving to the best of our ability?

The question struck me at the time because I was just entering the arena of ministry. I was a little unsure of myself, and so it was important for my self-confidence that I make a good impression. As a student I was pretty driven – I was keen to ‘perform well’ in my ministry tasks, so as you can imagine, I had quite a few people other than God in my grandstand!

Dr Hart emphasised that successful ministry was servant ministry. It wasn’t about impressing others, it was about being available for the Holy Spirit to use us to make a difference in the life of another person. It was about being aware of the needs of others, and looking for ways to encourage, support and help them. If we are truly focused on serving others rather than ourselves, then our grandstand empties, leaving only God that we seek to please.

In a sense, the reading from Matthew this morning is all about the grandstand!

This discourse comes towards the end of Jesus public teaching ministry. He would have been pretty fed up by then, as his entire ministry had been dogged by these scribes, Pharisees and teachers of the Law, who were constantly trying to trap him into saying something they could condemn him for.

In today’s passage Jesus has had enough – and he let them have it. He started by affirming their role: he said that they occupied Moses' seat; they were the legal experts and exponents of the Law; so they had a pretty vital role. However, he then turned to the people and warned them not to follow these leaders, because they didn’t practise what they preached!

The Scribes and Pharisees pursued "success" - and Jesus condemned them for it. They did things in their ministry so that people would see them and give them honour. They enjoyed the power that came with their position. They made rules and enforced them, without seeing the need to abide by them themselves. They flaunted the symbols of their position.

One of the signs of their supposed piety was a thing called a phylactery. This was a little box made of animal skin that they attached to their forehead or left hand by a leather strap, and they contained four passages of scripture. The Pharisees liked to wear BIG ones, so that you couldn't miss them. They made sure the tassels on their robes were LONG ones, so that you could tell how important they were. They loved the place of honour at banquets, and the best seats in the synagogues. And they loved to be called Rabbi - their equivalent of reverend!

So Jesus was scathing in his criticism of them. Their grandstand was full of people whom they lived to impress. It was all show. They obviously had no concern for the real welfare of those who were in their care. They were the embodiment of the false shepherds that the Old Testament prophets spoke about Jer. "Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!" declares the LORD.” 23:1

All the Scribes & Pharisees were interested in was the acclaim of men. All their display of power and authority did was to increase the burden on the people. Jesus denounced their hypocrisy.

One of the things I appreciate about our Anglican tradition is the pageantry. If you’ve ever been to one of the large diocesan gatherings, such as an ordination service, or the consecration of a bishop, you’ll know what I mean. The service begins with the strains of the magnificent cathedral organ as great procession moves down the aisle of the cathedral towards the altar. Clergy from all over the diocese process in in their white robes and colourful stoles. The deans & archdeacons follow adorned in beautifully embroidered copes followed by the bishops in their elaborate robes and mitres.

If viewed in the right way, the magnificence of such a service draws our attention heavenward, to the might and majesty of God. It lifts our spirits and helps us honour and glorify God – which is how it is meant to be.

However, I sometimes wonder whether we might face a similar danger to the Pharisees. It would be so easy to get caught up in the magnificent stained glass of the cathedral, the opulent robes and beautiful music – and to focus on these things in themselves, and to lose sight of God. Small parish churches do not have the same resources as our cathedral; however we still need to make sure our liturgies are for the glory of God. We need to watch our focus.

As Jesus spoke to the crowd about the inconsistency of their leaders, he introduced a perspective that was completely revolutionary. He told them that the true goal of leadership was not success, but service.

He said, "The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

This is the complete opposite of the way the world works! In the world, the greatest people are waited on and served by others. They issue commands and everything is done for them. However, in God’s kingdom, the whole thing is reversed.

We read in Philippians 2:8 that Jesus,“being found in appearance as a man, humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!”

At the last Supper, we know the story of how Jesus took a towel, wrapped it around his waist, and knelt down to wash his disciples’ feet.

Instead of pursuing successful moments - moments where we are being admired and honored, Jesus calls us instead to pursue serving moments – those times when God is able to work through us to touch the life of another person.

And often they are just that – moments. We might see someone struggling to their car loaded with bags from Woollies – there’s a serving moment! “Could I help you with those bags?,” we could ask. Perhaps we could pray that God makes us more aware of ‘serving moments’.

Rather than seeking personal glory, Jesus calls us to live in such a way that people will see our good works and give glory to our Father who is in heaven.

Rather than living to be served, Jesus calls us to live in service to God and our neighbour. And Jesus concludes by making this promise. He says,

For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

That should not be our motivation of course. We shouldn’t embark on a life of service, thinking, “If I get this right, then I will be exalted when I get to heaven.” No, Jesus is talking about consequences, not motivation. If we live a life of service where we are prepared to put others before ourselves, then it is simply is a given that God will exalt us when the time comes.

I'm sure we would all like to do something great for Jesus. If we only had more time! If we only had more money! If only we were famous so that we could use our fame for Jesus! If only we were brilliant, so that we could write a great Christian book or preach a great sermon. If only we were talented, so that we could make great music for Jesus!  
  
None of this is necessary though, is it? Our big gestures could bring us glory, but it’s our little kindnesses bring God glory. Our million dollar donation, if we had a million dollars to donate, might build a church that would stand for a century - but our helping hand or humble service can change a life that will stand for eternity.

Listen to Jesus words again:

"The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Instead of feeling that we cannot do enough, let us do what we can - and know that God will use what we offer. As Mother Teresa once said in an interview, "God doesn't call us to be successful. God calls us only to be faithful.

So – who’s in your grandstand? It’s a good question, isn’t it? It helps us identify our focus. Is it on success, or is it on service?

Let’s pray.