

John Docherty, 2013-02-24

Pharisee, can you see how Far I see?

AGM 2013

Luke 13: 31-35

“... At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, ‘Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.’ He said to them, ‘Go and tell that fox for me, “Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem ...”’

The image we most often see of Pharisees in the NT is that of hypocrites and self-righteous, self-proclaimed protectors of the law. Very regimented; very narrow-minded; very rigid in their approach to the faith. In their case, the term ‘legalistic’ is an understatement : they not only follow strictly the laws of Moses, they add to these laws a whole set of oral rules and traditions meant to place a kind of buffer around the core of the Mosaic law in an attempt to make it almost impossible to break the central elements of the law.

They’re part of a polarised religious life in Israel.

On one side of this life we have the Sadducees. They are the priestly caste, and enjoy an elite identity and lifestyle.

Politically, they are extremely conservative in the sense that they seek to protect the status quo. Their positions of power and social status are intimately linked with their relationship to the Roman authorities, and they seem not to be particularly loved by most of the population in Israel.

On a religious level, they seem to be very “materialistic” in the sense that they believe in the here and now, not in a life to come.

They do not believe in demons, angels, and other spiritual beings.

They reject the notion of the resurrection of the body, and believe that there is no existence after life.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, do believe in demons, angels, and other spiritual beings.

They believe in the resurrection of the dead at the end of times.

They fast.

They seek religious converts.

They pray.

They tithe their goods.

And they seem to get more support from the common people than do the Sadducees.

This split between the Pharisees and the Sadducees is a battle between two conflicting visions of what is right, of what is proper, and of what is necessary from a faith perspective.

They each have their own particular view of righteousness, and they each draw Jesus' criticism.

But I was struck by the fact that the Pharisees in this passage actually appear to care about Jesus' welfare. As I said earlier, we tend only to see the Pharisees in a negative light. They are the enemy, and they are, by and large, hypocrites, keeping to the letter of the laws that suit them, and ignoring the spirit of the more important values contained in the heart of the Jewish faith.

So I was intrigued by the fact that here we have Pharisees apparently going out of their way to warn Jesus of a danger to his life. Of course, one way of reading this passage is to see in the Pharisees' actions a self-serving threat : "We don't want you around here, and if you don't make tracks, Herod will take care of you for us!"

But I don't think that is how we are intended to understand what's going on here. It's easy to paint the entire party of Pharisees with the same brush, and most of the NT does that for the group as a whole, but I see no reason to believe that this isn't a genuine attempt to protect Jesus. It's actually a kind of refreshing acknowledgement that while a group may generally have certain tendencies, the individuals in that group have their own personal positive and negative qualities.

For example, there is another reference in Luke 7, where a Pharisee invites Jesus to eat with him in his own home. It's a pretty intimate invitation. Once there, the Pharisee

addresses him as “teacher”, though it is true that he seems to have invited Jesus as a way of taking a measure of the man. “Is he really a prophet, or not?”

In fact, although most references to Pharisees in the NT are overwhelmingly critical, there is a certain amount of material that suggests that Jesus may well have been seen to have been a member of the Pharisee party. His teachings were certainly closer to the teachings of the Pharisees than to that of the Sadducees. And while he criticises the Pharisees as hypocrites, he doesn’t really criticise their zeal for protecting the law – he instead points to their misplaced emphasis on the letter of the law, rather than on the spirit of the law.

Some commentators actually surmise that the arguments between Jesus and the Pharisees are a kind of in-house debate among peers about how best to interpret scripture, rather than a frontal attack from someone on the outside.

The apostle Paul was a Pharisee. (Any surprise there ??). One of the possible Lectionary readings for today is taken from Paul’s letter to the Philippians. I didn’t ask to have it read, and I won’t read it now, because it has a pretty contemptuous, critical tone with regard to a certain group, probably within the fledgling Christian community, and possibly adhering to a vision of faithfulness that conflicts with Paul’s. To be fair, Paul probably had very good reason to challenge those who are the targets of his criticism – I just want to note the narrow vision he brings to his own understanding of what is acceptable behaviour.

So ... I thought I would try to find out what else we know about these Pharisees. According to one encyclopaedia I consulted (Int’l Standard Bible Encycl), they seem to have come into being as a distinct group, sometime in the period between the OT and the NT, though the roots of their emphasis on strict observance of the scriptures may date to the post-exile period, following the return of the Hebrews to Palestine from Babylon (the time of the later prophets).

Because of their emphasis on strict observance of the law, they took on a name that would reflect this emphasis. There were 2 names that would have been likely : the Perushim (the hebrew / aramaic version of pharisee) which means “the separated ones”; or the Kedoshim, which means “the holy ones”. To quote the same encyclopaedia : “it is easy to see how those who made it their end to fulfill this ideal might take its name Perushim as a less presuming title than Kedoshim”. There seems to be a certain humility at work here not a virtue we usually associate with the Pharisees.

To continue with the Int'l Standard B Encycl :

“The Pharisees believed that God controls events, though men also choose their course of action ... Pharisees lived simply and did not pursue luxury. They were agreeable and hospitable to each other. In certain situations they sent out deputations to deal with various problems.”

“During the reign of Herod the Great the Pharisees refused to take an oath of loyalty to Herod and the Roman government. Josephus described the Pharisees as a ‘group of Jews priding itself on its adherence to ancestral custom and claiming to observe the laws of which the Deity approves’.”

“... they have a passion for liberty that is almost unconquerable, since they are convinced that God alone is their leader and master”

This is a kind of a radical reformation of the Jewish character and nation that was bound up with temple rituals and an abusive and elite priestly caste. It seems to be an attempt to return to a more faithful adherence to the heart of what God expects.

And yet, somehow, it all went terribly wrong. Many of them became caught up in the stiff and unbending nature of their faith, and imposed burdens on the people that they themselves were unable to bear. They observed some laws, and conveniently ignored others, and as a result incurred Jesus' anger and criticism as hypocrites, and blind guides. Their zeal for purity on a spiritual plane played out as a zeal for power and influence on a more mundane plane.

You know, one has to wonder how much of this flaw is particular to the Pharisees, and how much simply comes with the turf when one engages in an attempt to be faithful to one's understanding of truth.

If you really believe something to be true, is there any room for compromise, or “tolerance” of other points of view? Is it possible to be faithful to your beliefs while opening yourself up to influences that might potentially challenge or even “contaminate” your thinking?

Let me repeat some of the descriptives that were used for the Pharisees :

“A radical reformation”.

A people who set themselves apart from a corrupt and abusive priestly caste – the name “Pharisees” means a separated people.

A people who believe that God controls events, though men also choose their course of action.

A people who live simply and do not pursue luxury.

A people who are agreeable and hospitable to each other. In certain situations they send out deputations to deal with various problems.

A people who refuse to take an oath of loyalty to the government, priding themselves on their adherence to ancestral custom and claiming to observe the laws of which the Deity approves'.

A people who are convinced that God alone is their leader and master.

Sound familiar? It does to me.

As I've gone through some of the books in the office, I come across titles like "A people apart", "A new way to live", "The challenge of the disciplined life", "The people of God", "Discipling the brother" ...

Mennonites have pretty much always seen themselves as set apart - a "third way", neither Catholic nor Protestant, and committed to a return to the roots of Jesus' teaching.

Now I'm not trying to make too strong a case for a parallel between the early Anabaptists and Pharisees, other than to note some of the similarities, among which are an uncompromising stance on purity, and a quite deliberate identification of themselves as "separated ones" – read : "better than the other guys".

To be fair, the early Anabaptists of the European Radical Reformation did sit somewhere between a rock and a hard place :

- they were caught between a highly liturgical, priestly, sacramental church on one side issuing indulgences for sin, selling positions of power in the church, and with a history of torturing and burning heretics at the stake,
- and a highly structured, state-sanctioned clerical body on the other side that allowed no dissent and had a penchant for also putting heretics to death, though they preferred drowning to burning, at least where the Anabaptists were concerned. Although instead of burning, they did sometimes opt for a slow roasting alive.

These were not happy times for the early Anabaptists, and their dogged insistence on certain kinds of religious purity was simply par for the course. They were a persecuted

people, and I suppose it's not unreasonable to suppose that it takes a certain kind of single-mindedness, and perhaps even a certain level of "narrow-mindedness" to generate the kind of courage needed when faced with either the stake or the pond. You don't willingly die for something to which you have only a half-hearted commitment. The ones who went to the stake or who were drowned for their faith were not the ones who engaged the Catholics or Lutherans with "Hmm, I see your point ..."

So I don't want to fault the early Anabaptists, or anyone else for that matter, for having the strength of their convictions. It's actually a large part of what drew me into the Mennonite fold. I think it's an honourable thing, if one truly believes something, to be clear and unapologetic about it, to be coherent in one's choices in life, and to be willing to accept the consequences of those choices.

The problem with the Pharisees and with us as Mennonite Christians is not in having strong convictions. Without our convictions, we have no clear vision of what we should be or how we should live. The risk is allowing those convictions to blind us to the possible legitimacy of others' convictions, inside and outside the fold. By that I mean that as a body, we have much in common in terms of our convictions, but we are no longer, if we ever were, a homogeneous, unquestioning, single-minded people.

In the broader Mennonite family we have multiple denominations, born out of historical divisions and conflicting visions.

In MC Canada, we struggle with defining just what we believe in a number of areas.

In MCEC we have multiple styles of worship and practice.

In MFM, we have conflicting visions of how best to move forward as a group, of how best to use our resources and define our objectives.

In our own families we probably butt heads from time to time over decisions based on our particular understanding of what is right.

Internally, we are all occasionally torn as individuals, as we struggle to understand what is best, and to find the courage and strength to do that.

The problem is not in believing we understand what God wants for this world. The risk is in assuming that we have the full picture of what God wants for the world, and assuming that we have little to learn from other traditions or from each other.

The problem is not in trying to live a faithful and obedient life according to how we understand faithfulness. The risk is in a rigid insistence on a particular set of norms, and an arrogant dismissal of others who understand faithfulness differently.

The problem is not in having clear guidelines on what is appropriate behaviour, and what is not. The risk is in being selective about what applies to you, and what applies to me.

The challenge is in being true to our convictions while still being able to engage meaningfully with those who may not share those convictions. And to do that in a way that doesn't give rise to our own sense of superiority.

On a more personal level, one of the challenges is to live our lives with integrity while resisting the temptation towards self-righteousness.

I try to live with integrity – I try to practise what I preach. Some of my decisions or my actions haven't always been consistent with what I say I believe, but I try.

A couple of years ago an MFMer asked me if I would ever actually admit to having any vices. I don't remember what might have been the specific context here that gave rise to the question, but methinks he was picking up echoes of my own latent self-righteousness.

But, the question was put : “John, would you ever admit to having any vices?”

The simple answer to his question would have been either “yes” or “no”.

Of course, answering “no” might have been a bit ambiguous and potentially problematic.

“No. I have no vices, so won't admit to having any.”

Or

“No. I have vices, but I'd never admit to it.” Either way, I'd have been in an awkward position.

“Yes” would have been a less ambiguous answer, but it would have, of course, left me vulnerable to the follow-up question, “Well, what are they?”

So, in my diplomatic, don't-give-him-a-straight-answer, kind of way, I suggested that if he got a couple of beers into me I might be willing to admit to a vice or two.

Fortunately for me, he never took me up on the offer of plying me with beers, but he seemed happy enough to know that “Beer” was already on my list of vices.

But self-righteousness is only one of the risks when we try to live and act with integrity. Most of the Pharisees fell into that trap. The other risk is simply being deaf and blind to alternative ways of living faithfully.

Each of us here has a vision for MFM. Every one of us. We have some sense of what we would like to see this group *be*. For some of us, this vision might simply be a desire that what we find comforting about this group not be lost somehow. For some, the vision may involve specific kinds of new activities that will enrich our lives spiritually. Most of us won't have a well-defined, sophisticated vision. We just know that this is where we're meant to be and we're committed to being here and being a part of listening together for God's voice.

Last week, David Martin asked what we as a church (the broader church in Canada and the world) are willing to give up for Lent. He couched it in terms of power, and linked it to the distinction between the Church having a mission to accomplish, and God having a mission to accomplish through the Church.

He basically put the question to us : “Are we willing to relinquish the power needed to accomplish what we perceive as *our* mission, and return to God the power to use us to accomplish *God's* mission?”

I made the observation during the sharing time that one of the challenges of letting God work out God's mission, is that God works through *us*, so we still have to be careful about interpreting our own passions and desires as God's.

The other part of that is watching for where and how God is at work. For some years now, the broader Mennonite church has been encouraging each of its congregations to be “missional” – to be attentive to how God appears to be already working, and to build on that. The temptation might be to see God at work in the “successful” places : the big churches, the spectacular events, the financially robust institutions, etc.

Let me suggest that Jesus' work could have been seen as a failure. He ended up on a cross, and for non-believers, that was the end of the story. Yet we believe that was not the end of the story, and far from a failure.

The reformers and counter-reformers of the 16th century did not see God at work in the community of Anabaptists. They saw heretics. Yet we see their suffering and

persecution as martyrdom, and a clear sign that God was at work to preserve a faithful understanding of what was intended for the church.

In an hour or so we'll be having our annual meeting. We'll be grappling with our various visions of what MFM can or should be.

We'll be looking at how we select elders.

We'll be discussing the merits of a revived Mennonite Voluntary Service unit here in Montréal.

We'll be voting on the candidacy of Gary and Lydia Harder.

We'll be choosing the people who can best represent us on the various committees.

And, of course, we'll be looking at how to pay for all of this.

There will be conflicting visions.

There may be a tendency to see some of these decisions as a "right" / "wrong" choice.

There may be strong convictions about the relative values of certain courses of action.

There may be some risk of uncomfortable polarisation on some discussions.

And there is always the danger that some of us will leave the meeting feeling that we've been ignored, dismissed, or simply frustrated that things didn't go the way we wanted.

There is also the possibility that during the discussions we can each present our thinking in the way that comes most naturally to us, and that the rest of the group is able to receive and hear this with open minds. We may even find that there is already a strong consensus on much of the agenda.

Let me return to the "missional" church model I mentioned a few moments ago. Our AGM is part of the process of discerning how God is at work here, in this circle. It's not the only way that discernment takes place, and it's maybe not even the most important place. A lot of discernment takes place throughout the year in the various committees and in our own personal perception of what good things are happening here.

But the AGM is one of those moments when we *decide*. We weigh the pros and cons of proposals and agree to move forward in a particular way. This building is not Mount Sinai, Moses isn't here to bring us the law, and our decisions are not carved in stone, but this is a key moment in providing direction to the group.

We're a bit more like Mount Horeb where Elijah was confronted with gale-force winds, an earthquake, fire, and a still small voice. God wasn't in the impressive hurricane, the terrifying earthquake or in the consuming fire. God was in the subtle, quiet voice.

So here are my questions as we move into the AGM.

Where are the subtleties in what God is doing here at MFM?

What are the good things that have happened over the last couple of years?

What is working?

What are the new opportunities opening up before us?

What are the resources God is making available to us as we refine our vision?

As we look around this circle, what do we see that makes us want to be here, and makes us believe that God is indeed at work?

And as the others look around this circle, what do they see in you and me that gives them hope that we are on the right track?

And let's not ask each other "Can you see how far I see?"

Let's rather ask ourselves : "Can I see how far you see?"