

*Sermon, Trinity VI Except your righteousness exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter the Kingdom of Heaven...*

G.K. Chesterton's grandfather had a friend who every Sunday spent the day walking through the streets and parks carrying a Prayer Book under his arm. But he had no intention of going to church. When he was challenged about this, he replied, "Look Chessie, I do it to set an example to others". This is the sort of smug, self-righteous, hypocritical reputation which the Scribes and Pharisees have in the gospels. In his usually quite splendid *Life of Christ*, F.W. Farrer denounces the teaching of the Scribes in some fierce phrases: "The teaching of the Scribes was narrow, dogmatic, material. It was told in manner, frivolous; in matter, second-hand and repetitive, with no freshness in it, no force, no fire, servile to all authority, opposed to all independence; at once erudite and foolish, contemptuous and mean".

But was it really like this? Let's take a look at some of the Scribes' teachings from the Jewish literature. Hillel the Scribe once got up to leave a tutorial with his pupils. They asked him where he was going and he replied that he was going to perform a pious act. Soon, they heard the sound of water and discovered Hillel in the bath. "But, Master, you said you were going to perform a pious act".

"And so I am. If the statues of the idols are every day washed in the arena, how much more should the body be washed which is the dwelling of God's Holy Spirit?"

Or this story: A stranger once turned up at Abraham's tent towards nightfall and asked for lodging. Abraham welcomed him, gave him supper and then asked him to join in evening prayers. His guest would not, because, he said, he didn't believe in God: he was a fire-worshipper. So Abraham threw him out into the night. Later God appeared to Abraham in a dream and said, "I have loved that stupid man for seventy years. Couldn't you put up with him for one night?"

Are these teachings really, as Farrer says, "contemptuous and mean"?

Then there was the Scribe Mar Ukba. He always gave a poor down-and-out a little money on Yom Kippur. When Mar Ukba was too old to visit the poor man in person, he sent his son. His son returned and said, "Father I refused to give the man your money for when I saw him he was drinking good wine".

Mar Ukba said, "So he has taste! Then I must send him double the money in future years".

Is that second-hand, with no freshness in it"?

Or there is the Scribe's saying, "When their love was strong they could sleep in a bed no wider than a sword's edge. Now their love has grown cold, a bed even fifty feet wide is too narrow for them".

Or again, "When thou, man, art tempted to think well of thyself, remember that thou wast not made until the sixth day. Why a flea had precedence over thee!"

One old joke beloved of the Pharisees goes like this: “What did Eve do when Adam returned home late? She counted his ribs”.

And Arika the Scribe attacked the ancient evil of Puritanism like this: “At the last judgement, man will be called to account for denying himself the good things of the world that are lawfully allowed”.

And one more example from what is a marvellous body of teaching: In a certain village there lived a very holy man called Rabbi Huna. One day there was a great fire but the village was saved, as if by a miracle. The faithful went to the synagogue and asked the Scribe, “Were we saved because of the great holiness of Rabbi Huna?” The reply came, “No. The village was saved because there is a woman in one of the back streets who lights her oven every day and lets her neighbours use it for free”.

So why are the gospels so hard on the Scribes and Pharisees? Jesus on one occasion reviled them as “hypocrites, whited sepulchres”. Though it has to be said that Our Lord’s attitude towards the Scribes was ambivalent. There are in the gospels stories of how he would sit down to eat and drink with them. The usual explanation for the condemnation of the teaching of the Scribes is that it was uninspired, repetitious, legalistic. Well, it isn’t in the stories I’ve quoted this morning. And frequently the teaching of the Scribes is no different from the teaching of Jesus himself. They too instructed that, if you saw someone in trouble on the Sabbath, you should put aside your Sabbath observance and go to his aid.

Are they reviled then because they are narrow nationalists, bigoted racist xenophobes, whereas Jesus teaches the parable of the Good Samaritan, the noble foreigner? This can’t be true either, because the Law of Moses – that which the Scribes spent their lives reading and teaching – commands that the Jew must be charitable to the stranger within his gates. And another saying of the Scribes is: “If two men seek your help – one your friend and the other your enemy – then help the enemy first”.

There certainly is in the teaching of the Scribes a punctiliousness which impatient people see as rather tedious, but which more thoughtful people might regard as admirable. They are, after all, in the Greek called Grammateus, that is secretaries. Their task was to hold together and interpret the whole body of the Mosaic Law and to teach it as a unity: you might say, the Scribes and Pharisees, the Grammateus studied and taught moral grammar. Modern educationists who teach neither morals nor grammar are very ill-placed to criticise the Scribes

Also, the Scribes were reticent and sober in their language of interpretation and teaching, because they were in awe of the Law of God. Remember in the Old Testament when the tablets of the Law were carried in the Ark of the Covenant, any unauthorised person who touched the Ark dropped dead. The Scribes regarded the Law as the mind of God. So when they interpreted it, they would say cautiously, “Rabbi Ben Hadad says so and so about this passage; on the other hand, Rabbi Eliezer says *this*”. It came as a shock to them then when Jesus observed none of these courtesies but launched straight away into, “Ye have heard it said...but *I* say unto you...”

So why do the Scribes and Pharisees – and the Jews in general – get such a bad press in the New Testament? The answer I'm afraid is political. By the time the gospels came to be written, some forty or fifty years after the crucifixion and the Resurrection, the Christian faith was making great headway among the gentiles of the Roman Empire. Naturally then, Christian leaders didn't want to upset the gentiles or other of the Romans, so they showed the Roman authorities in a good light with stories of Centurions who of their charity built synagogues. And even the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate who signed Jesus' death warrant is portrayed as doing so with the utmost reluctance, attempting over and over again to have him released before, in exasperation, washing his hands of the whole case.

So, if they couldn't – politically – blame the Romans for the crucifixion, who was there left to blame but the Jewish authorities, the scribes and Pharisees? And so began in the New Testament itself that regrettable part of Christian tradition: anti-Semitism. What does all this teach us? That it is a very dangerous thing to read the Bible.