

# Practise what you teach

## Planning

### LECTIONARY

Micah 3.5-12, Psalm 43,  
1 Thessalonians 2.9-13, **Matthew 23.1-12**

**Context** We move, this week, to the opening of Matthew 23, a chapter in which Jesus laments much that has gone wrong in the practice of faith in his day. Our reading does not run to the minutiae but opens up the context into which Jesus is speaking. The heart, for us, is in the last two verses of our passage.

**Common thread – Practise what you teach (Matthew 23.1-12)** Casual reading of the Gospels, including today's passage, can lead to a simplistic perception of the Pharisees and scribes playing the 'baddies' to Jesus the 'goody'. More careful attention to biblical Judaism is needed to correct this misconception. Today we consider our approaches to learning and teaching, and the avoidance of hypocrisy. *An alternative thread*, Working day and night, concludes the series on 1 Thessalonians.

**Seasonal pages** Introduction to the Bible notes p.1; The Bible in English p.2; Words we have loved p.3; All-age services: Milk and honey, a Creation Time service pp.4-5; For all the saints [WEB](#).

**Special Sunday** Some churches use readings for All Saints today. Resources to support this are on the [WEB](#).

### PLUS

**Hymns and songs** See opposite page.

**ROOTS resources** Look at *ROOTS Children & Young People* magazine for further ideas.

**Previous issues** [WEB](#) See the *Week by week* page and follow the links in *From the resources bank*.

**Children's sheet** [WEB](#) Downloadable activities for during and after the service.

**Music** *Tubular Bells*, Mike Oldfield.

**Websites** *Good Will Hunting*: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good\_Will\_Hunting; *Crackerjack*: www.bbc.co.uk/cult/classic/crackerjack/intro.shtml. Hyperlinks are on the [WEB](#).

## Gather

### Prepare the space

Display pictures and brochures of schools and teachers. It would be useful to find pictures of Orthodox Jews wearing shawls and phylacteries. Obtain a backpack and fill it with some stones (make sure it can be lifted – just). If your church has some grand chairs, arrange for one to be placed prominently in front of the congregation.

### Gathering words

Jesus teaches us not only always to try to do what we say but also to be aware of the implications of not doing what we say we will.

### Call to worship

Jesus our teacher says, 'Let the greatest among you be your servant, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted.'

## Prayer

Prayers of intercession, a personal prayer for the week, and further prayers are on the [WEB](#).

### A prayer of approach

*Based on Psalm 43*

O Lord my God,  
send out your light and truth  
to lead me.  
Let them bring me to your holy house  
and to this time of worship.  
I will come before your altar with joy;  
I will come and sing your praises.  
Nothing will stand in my way,  
for my hope is in you, O my God.  
I shall praise you, for you are  
my help and my God.  
Amen.

Material for the All Saints readings  
can be found on the [WEB](#).

### A prayer of thanksgiving

*Based on 1 Thessalonians*

We give you thanks, O God,  
for those who have influenced us  
on our journey of faith:  
parents who first took us to church;  
teachers who told stories of your love;  
sermons that spoke directly to us;  
faith stories shared by other believers.  
We thank you that we hear your word  
through other voices –  
hymn writers, poets and preachers.  
Again and again, O God,  
we give you thanks  
for those who have influenced us  
on our journey of faith.  
**Amen.**

### A prayer of confession

Lord God, we ask your forgiveness  
for the times we have let others down,  
knowingly or unknowingly.  
We ask forgiveness for the times  
when our words or actions  
have caused distress  
adding to another's burdens.  
We ask forgiveness for the times  
when the example we have set others  
has not been that of Jesus.  
Forgive us, Lord.  
Lead us into situations where  
we can show your love.  
**Amen.**

### Sending out prayer

Lord Jesus, lead us this week  
into opportunities where  
we can serve you by serving one another.  
Help us walk the week humbly  
with our God,  
uplifted by your presence,  
guided by your Spirit,  
and cherished in your love.  
We go in peace.  
**Amen.**

### Ways into prayer

Invite people to try this prayer activity during the week, as a way of symbolising their release from burdens. Collect seven twigs or small sticks (cocktail sticks would do). You could have these available in church for people to take away. Fasten them together with elastic bands. Each morning people take one twig out and say a prayer about something of concern, giving that burden to God, for example,

'Lord God, I am worried/concerned about...I leave it with you. Hold...in your ever-loving arms.' Then let the twig go: sticks gathered from the ground could be cast back to the ground. Cocktail sticks might be added to a compost heap or green bin.

## Bible notes

### The links between the readings

In humility, be brothers and sisters and shun status-seeking.

### Old Testament Micah 3.5-12

Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah who prophesied at the end of the eighth century BC. Isaiah was a royal official who was concerned with religion and politics, while Micah was perhaps more rural and offered social criticism. Having criticised the rulers of Israel (3.1-4), he turns to the prophets (vv.5-8).

These men were not the canonical prophets we are familiar with; they were communal, professional prophets, members of a guild, probably earning their living in Jerusalem (see 1 Kings 22). Micah was not one of them; he stands out as a brave individual resisting the tradition. (Prophets, seers and diviners all seem to be the same in vv.6-7.)

The prophets are criticised on two counts: for only prophesying when they have been paid, and for tailoring their prophecies according to the needs of the customer (v.5). Micah says that they will be denied divine revelations (v.7). They chose to ignore the trouble that was brewing and the religious and moral causes of it.

Micah then attacks the whole religious and political establishment – rulers, priests and prophets – and predicts the consequent fall of Jerusalem (vv.9-12). This did not happen in Micah's time when Jerusalem was threatened by the Assyrians, and he was no doubt regarded as a false prophet. But Jeremiah remembered Micah's words (Jeremiah 26.18) to support his own prophecies, and both proved to be true prophets in 597 BC when the Babylonians finally took Jerusalem. The key point is the moral failure of the recognised religious leaders of the time.

### Psalm 43

This psalm could have been prayed by Micah or any of the great prophets, especially Jeremiah who suffered terribly for going against the majority view. It is a private entreaty to God and it is hard to imagine it forming part of the official cult in the Temple, even though there is a reference to the author going 'to your holy hill...to your dwelling...to the altar of God' (vv.3-4). Maybe that is where his final vindication would take place. This is a criticism of his own nation – the 'enemy' of verse 2 is probably his own people. Finally the psalmist expresses hope in God, for there seems to be no hope from those Israelites who should provide it.

### New Testament 1 Thessalonians 2.9-13

Judging by verse 9 and also by the way Paul was supported materially by the Christians in Philippi while he was establishing a church in Corinth (2 Corinthians 8), he wanted to preclude any accusation that he was 'sponging off' his new communities. 'Working night and day' probably means that Paul worked to support himself and his mission to spread the gospel. Judging by his own testimony, Paul's practice was in marked contrast to the prophets above and the Pharisees in the next reading.

### Gospel Matthew 23.1-12

The Pharisees were a group of laymen who earned their living by day and assiduously studied the Torah in their own time. As they were literate, they were also scribes who could perform legal tasks for the illiterate population. As students of the law, they were consulted by the populace for legal judgements and, while there were different schools of Pharisaic thought, they tended to be less severe than the Sadducees. After the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, they became the rabbis of the second century and beyond, and the leaders of Judaism. Josephus says there were around 6,000 in Jesus' day.

The Gospels show the Pharisees as the main butt of Jesus' criticism. In reality, their religious views had much in common (for example, on the resurrection) with Jesus' teaching, but perhaps we tend to argue most vigorously (and sometimes violently) with those close to us. A careful reading of the first three Gospels shows that Jesus' criticism is not so much of the Pharisees' teaching, but their hypocrisy.

They say one thing and do another. They impose religious practices on others that they are not prepared to shoulder themselves. They keep the required religious conventions but are spiritually bankrupt (see Luke 18.9-14, which has the same conclusion as here). They are like sepulchres, gleaming and freshly whitewashed on the outside, but a heap of dust and dead bones on the inside (23.27).

Here they are not like Micah's corrupt prophets because Jesus accepts that what they teach is right – they stand in the place of Moses. But they love the status that goes with this. They wear ostentatious prayer shawls and phylacteries (short scriptural texts held in a small box and bound to the forehead and arm by leather straps). Refusing to be called 'teacher' or 'father' need not be taken literally. The point is that we have to be equal as brothers and sisters, servants (*diakonoi*) of each other, in humility, not seeking status above others. (See also Matthew 6.2-6, 16-18 and the rest of Matthew 23.)

### HYMNS AND SONGS

Songs in *italics* are suitable for all ages.

All my hope on God is founded  
Be thou my vision

*Father, we adore you*

*If you want to be great* (CFW, JP)

Give thanks with a grateful heart

Jesus, all holy

O Jesus I have promised

*O Lord, all the world belongs to you*

There's a wideness in God's mercy

Through all the changing scenes of life

To God be the glory!

We have a gospel to proclaim

See inside front cover for key to abbreviations.

# Word & response

WITH ADULTS

## Practise what you teach

### Matthew 23.1-12

**Jesus, the supreme teacher, urges us not to heap burdens on each other but rather to help one another.**

- A teacher usually tries to encourage students, but in the 1997 film, *Good Will Hunting* (see *Planning*), a professor leaves a problem on a chalkboard as a challenge posed to his students, hoping someone might find the solution by the end of the semester. When it is solved quickly and anonymously, he posts a much more difficult problem – one that took him and his colleagues years to prove – imposing an impossible burden on his students.
- Some may recall being faced with, say, a piece of homework that proved so difficult that even a parent could not solve the problem. The Pharisee group referred to in many of the Gospel accounts was a group trying to interpret the law and make it applicable to day-to-day living, but they tended to say one thing and to do another. They imposed religious practices on others that were well-nigh impossible to keep, or in some cases that only they themselves had the wherewithal to observe. How can we teach others in ways that release potential rather than create burdens and feeling of guilt?
- Perhaps the best teaching of all is in the way that we live our lives. A family once made the decision to live and work on a British Forces overseas base because they reckoned that everyday opportunities in these close-knit societies afforded some of the best ways to witness to the love of God.
- The scribes and the Pharisees were people living everyday lives who studied the law part-time. Nevertheless they managed to accommodate their demanding religious observance. This was clearly not always so easy for the people they sought to teach. In what ways do Christian practices impose burdens – for example on young families, commuters or shift workers?

## Another angle

An RAF plane navigator was retraining to join a helicopter crew. In order to build up his body strength, sessions of weightlifting were arranged. Attempting to bench press

a heavy weight, he struggled to lock his arms out. After words of none-too-gentle encouragement, the instructor pushed the weight up with one finger. Sometimes when we are struggling to cope with heavy burdens, to the point of failure, God's finger is there for us!

### Living faith

**Consider:** In the course of everyday living, can we become more aware of the ways in which our lifestyles impose burdens on others?

## Alternative thread

## Working day and night

### 1 Thessalonians 2.9-13

**Faith is about down-to-earth holiness, not an escape from a harsh world.**

- The language of labour runs through this letter like a golden thread (alongside v.9 see 1.3, 4.11, 5.12-13), and offers a glimpse of the possible setting of some of Paul's missionary work in Thessalonica. It has been suggested that some converts were drawn from Thessalonica's manual workers, whose homes and workshops were found in high-rise tenement buildings. Paul shared the gospel with them as he worked alongside them, cutting and sewing leather for the tents he made. Faith turned these hand labourers into extended messianic families (notice Paul's use of family language throughout the letter) who shared everything, supporting one another financially as they lived, worked and ate together. They were very poor, yet their faith made them remarkably generous towards those outside their number (see 4.10; 2 Corinthians 8.1-5).
- One of the marks of the ministry of Paul and his co-workers was their financial investment in this family of faith, rather than relying on the generosity of others. Working 'night and day' meant going beyond the normal twelve hours, into the time after the community's evening meal (see 2 Thessalonians 3.6.ff). Paul saw this hard manual labour as a sharing of themselves, not simply the gospel message – an act of gentle, tender and profound care towards those who had become 'very dear to us' (2.7,8); a demonstration of

fatherly concern and encouragement for the family's growth towards maturity. As 'pure, upright and blameless...conduct', here is an example of a down-to-earth holiness that sees the coming of God's 'kingdom' as the renewal of the 'glory' of created, bodily life, rather than the way to escape from a harsh and disturbing world.

- Not everyone in the Thessalonian church agreed with Paul. Some believed that the arrival of God's kingdom in the enthusiasm and intensity of Spirit-fuelled experience left no room for the responsibilities of marriage or work (see 4.1-8; 5.12-14; 2 Thessalonians 3.6ff), and allowed 'idlers' to live off the generosity of the rest. Paul rejected this blissful, escapist mentality. It subverted the God-given order, and confused those believers who experienced hardship and bereavement (see 4.13ff).
- How easy is it to see work as an expression of faith and a labour of love in a culture dominated by individualistic capitalism? For many people, earning money is part of a hand-to-mouth existence in which low wages reflect low prices in highly competitive economies. At the other extreme, high wages can be used to feed an unsustainable self-indulgence that, in its own way, is as escapist as the spirituality Paul rejected. His communitarian vision of working and earning may seem so idealistic as to be unrealistic, but here and there we may catch glimpses of it in our world. Even if we don't, there is surely a challenge to evaluate some of the most basic elements of our experience – work, money, eating, belief, sexuality, family, community, ageing and death – in the light of this letter, particularly verse 12.

# Word & response

## WITH ALL AGES TOGETHER

### Practise what you teach

Matthew 23.1-12

#### Open the Word

The children's TV programme *Crackerjack* included a game called 'Double or drop', in which the contestant had to carry more and more objects without dropping them, usually as questions were asked. Cabbages were given for wrong answers, but prizes for the right answer, and contestants took home whatever they were holding at the end of the game.

As the passage from Matthew is read out, you could give items to the reader at regular intervals to 'burden' them. The reader might pretend to drop most of the objects by verse 11, and perhaps those who have been adding the burdens could pick them up and stand alongside the reader for the final verses.

#### Explore the Word

##### A good teacher supports rather than demands.

Sometimes when we find something easy to do, we are not aware of how difficult it is for others. You might invite a musician to play something (or a juggler to juggle or a gymnast to jump) and invite a generous volunteer to try to copy them. Then invite someone who is good at a different sort of practical task (such as icing a cake) to help and support a novice try out the skill. It seems from the story as though the Pharisees were behaving more in the way of the first demonstration, showing what they could do and placing unrealistic burdens upon others. By contrast, Jesus always seeks to empower. Jesus was often called 'Teacher'. A good teacher is one who, while offering challenge and urging learners to try their best, does not burden them with unrealistic expectations and impending failure.

#### Respond to the Word

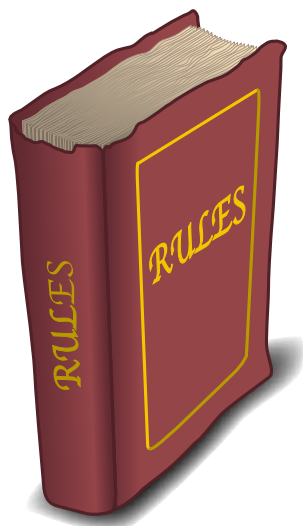
**Role play:** Invite someone to pretend to be about to go on holiday with a rucksack on their back. Each time they are about to depart, someone introduces an extra item they must take. Continue until the rucksack becomes too bulky to carry at all (ensure the rucksack is not so heavy that it hurts – use light items such as plastic plates and cups, or quilts).

**Role play:** Ask people to act out various everyday roles like shopping, cooking or even praying, first in the manner of someone who is quiet and unassuming, and then in the manner of someone trying to show off. You might hold a *Strictly Come Dancing* style vote to find the most accomplished 'show-off'!

**Play:** Invent a game a bit like the Radio 4 game *Just a Minute*, where a speaker has to talk about a subject for one minute. However, keep adding increasingly complicated rules, for example, the speaker must say 'Jesus' every third word, or they must lick their lips each time they speak the subject word.

**Think:** Invite people to identify a teacher who pressured or burdened them (no names) and then contrast that experience with lessons they really enjoyed. What made the difference?

**Play:** Think up a game that has lots of instructions, for example, stand on one leg while winking and holding your right hand in the air. In each round, those who do not follow the instructions are 'out'.



**Pray:** Pray silently for people who are troubled or worried about something in their lives or in the world. If you have used a backpack with stones or some other representation of burdens, invite people to remove a stone from the pile or sack and carry it with them for the rest of the worship time, finally putting the burdens down before the final blessing.

**Listen:** Listen to a piece of music like Mike Oldfield's 'Tubular Bells' (see *Planning*) where more and more instrumental voices are added to the piece. As you listen think of the ways that we sometimes add to our own worries or those of our loved ones, and ask God to help you to keep in tune with what Jesus teaches.

##### Don't forget the Children's

sheet [WEB](#) which has activities that can be used during the service and at home.

##### A prayer for all ages together

> USE DIFFERENT GROUPS OF VOICES TO SAY THIS PRAYER.

Lord God,  
**we give you thanks  
 for the ways we learn from each other.**

Children teach us about joy and spontaneity;  
*young people teach us about the courage to start out and about challenging the world;*  
 parents teach us about caring and nurturing;  
*older people teach us about the value of looking back and reflecting on what we have done.*

**Help us to share our gifts  
 and to avoid burdening  
 one another.**

**Amen.**