

**Bruton Parish Church
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
October 30, 2011
The Reverend Charles A. Robinson**

In the name of and for the Glory of God†

Last week as the Gospel was being read, I found some amusement and sensed that many of you did as well at the closing words of the reading: “No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.” Jesus was confounding the authorities and influential people with his enigmatic answers to their tricky questions, his challenging questions, and his declaration that love for God and others answers everything. Jesus silenced them.

Having confounded them, Jesus, with today’s Gospel reading, leads off a series of direct denunciations of his challengers. In scriptures, we will not read, Jesus excoriates them with a series of prophetic woes, “Woe to you, Scribes, Pharisees, and hypocrites!”

Jesus challenges the powerful and titled people’s motives for the things that they do and clearly calls calamity upon their heads for practicing what they do for all of the wrong reasons. During the discourse beyond today’s reading, he repeatedly calls them blind and emphasizes that their motives are wrong and the legalities that they call for are not consistent with their own behaviors and attitudes. He calls them whitewashed tombs (beautiful on the outside and dead inside), and finally refers to them as snakes and vipers. Jesus wonders how they will be able to escape the worst probable outcome.

These are harsh words for the neglectful and hypocritical actions of these powerful people. They are such an indictment and so severe that they have led us to only be able to hear the titles, Scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees as completely pejorative terms and to see them simply as evil and plotting. You have heard me say before and recently that these leaders are passionate to maintain order, stability, and the status quo.

Most of us are leaders of some form or status in our various communities, professional and personal. We have possessed and do possess power and influence and some of us bear titles that signify that power. If we lived in the culture and time that Jesus occupies and on which Matthew reflects, I would be a Temple Priest, and many of you would be the equivalent of Pharisees, Lawyers, or Scribes. We have much more in common with those characters than with Jesus and the hoi polloi disciples that follow him.

The Gospel today frames the inflammatory and accusatory language that Jesus uses. Jesus does not criticize the teaching of these leaders. In fact, he begins with these words, “The Scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.

Jesus details this indictment with his many accusations of hypocrisy. It is the desire to be seen, to be honored, to be seated and greeted with great respect in the marketplace, and to be anointed with titles more than to accomplish the work of God that the titles demand.

When Jesus confronts the use of titles, he is, in fact, confronting the comfort of titles to the detriment of the work of God. The motive is what matters.

Many erroneously use this scripture as a basis to proclaim that Jesus forbids the uses of any title, (Father, Rabbi, or Teacher) for those engaged in the work of God. To imagine that forbidding the use of these or any other titles will bring humility to the haughty or ensure that the self-important will serve, misses the point of Jesus' long discourse.

The center of what Jesus says in this Gospel is not found in the admonitions on titles, but in the simple phrase in its midst – “you are all students.” The translators of this version likely chose the word “students” because they felt it reflected an egalitarian and common level. Other translations, translate it as “brothers.” The word is, in fact, ἀδελφός. You will recognize it as one of the base words for Philadelphia, the modern American, and ancient Greek cities of “brotherly love.” The word signifies those of common parentage, both father and mother and further communicates, “one of equal rank and dignity.”¹

Jesus is emphasizing that regardless of office or title, we are all fellow travelers, thus – “the greatest among you will be your servant.”

This is why Jesus says to the disciples and crowds, “do as they teach and follow it.” What they teach is what Jesus quoted in our Gospel last week – love God completely with all that you are and love one another with the same zeal. Before God, we are all the same. That is what the Hebrew Scriptures ultimately teach, says Jesus. He clearly goes on to say that they, the teachers, and leaders do not practice this life and he offers the series of woes to accuse them graphically.

Jesus' admonition to his disciples and to the crowds is to, “see that hierarchies and self aggrandizement do not rob you of these precious truths – the greatest commandments – loving one another, serving one another before God.”

No titles are necessary to works of the Gospel, but neither need they be detrimental.

It seems appropriate here to speak about the understanding of ministry in our tradition. Every one of you, who identifies as a follower of Christ, is called to a ministry in the community of this congregation for the furtherance of the Gospel and the Kingdom of God.

¹502 ἀδελφός

ἀδελφός [ἄ], (α *copul.*, δελφύς; cf. Lat. co-uterinus), so that ἀδελφοί are properly *sons of the same mother*:

I. as Subst., ἀδελφός, ὁ, voc. ἄδελφε (not -φέ), Ion. ἀδελφεός, Ep. -ερός: *a brother*, or generally, *a near kinsman*, ἀδελφοί *brother and sister*, like Lat. fratres, Eur.; ἀδελφεὸν ἀπ' ἀμφοτέρων *brothers* by both parents, i.e. not half-brothers, Hdt.

. *a brother* (as a fellow Christian), N.T.

II. Adj., ἀδελφός, ἡ, ὄν, **brotherly or sisterly**, Trag., Plat.

. like Lat. geminus, gemellus, of anything *in pairs*, twin, Xen.: *then, just like*, c. gen. or dat., ἀδελφὰ τῶνδε, ἀδελφὰ τούτοισι Soph.

424 ἀδελφός, οὔ, ὁ brother; (1) literally, male sibling with at least one parent in common (JN 1.41); figuratively, members of the Christian community, and of associates in religious work (*spiritual*) *brother, fellow Christian, fellow believer* (RO 8.29); (2) in Jewish usage *fellow countryman* (AC 3.22); (3) **of one of equal rank and dignity** (MT 23.8); (4) of a neighbor or member of one's in-group *brother, friend* (MT 5.22)

The natures of those ministries are wide and varied – reader, chalice, usher, choir member, pastoral care provider, vestryperson to mention only some. As your priests, we spend a significant amount of energy in support and encouragement of you in the fulfillment of those ministries. That is our calling in this Body of Christ.

We are pastors, but we are not only pastors. We are teachers, but we are not only teachers. We are preachers, but we are not only preachers. We are leaders, but we are not only leaders. We are councilors, but we do not only take council. We pronounce God’s blessings and we administer the Sacraments (BCP pp 525-534). The oft used titles used in other traditions- pastor and preacher-do not adequately describe our ministry or role. The adjective, “The Reverend” is not a personal verbal address title any more than “The Honorable.” We are priests of the Church.

Throughout the historic church, the title, Father has been an ancient and traditional title and with the welcomed ordination of women, the title, Mother has emerged for many as a natural extension of that. These titles are not required, nor need they be detrimental. They are not, as many imagine, unique to Roman Catholicism. They precede all divisions in the Church. They can be honorable and appropriate titles.

When I arrived at Bruton, many called me Father from the beginning, others by my first name. I do not discourage either. The priests in this parish do not require any specific title or appellation as recognition of our ministry, nor do we find them detrimental. We often refer to one another in council with our Bishop and in other formal communications with these titles as a sign of mutual respect.

What matters in this place and in this time, is our mutual ministry together for the furtherance of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the bringing of the Kingdom of God in our midst. What matters is whether the priests here provide the encouragement and support necessary to enable each and every member of this community to exercise their particular ministry for that purpose.

For those in this congregation for whom these titles are helpful and comforting, please continue to use them. For those for whom these titles are troubling or difficult, do not use them. They are not required, neither need they be detrimental.

Important and challenging work lies ahead for this community of Christ. Jesus’ words call into question the motives of those trapped by titles. Our motives for everything we do, for every ministry we pursue must ultimately proclaim to all who enter this place and go into the world that Jesus Christ is Lord! - That the Kingdom of God is found amongst us, as we love God and love one another.

Blessed be the name of God†