

Keeping Up Appearances

Sermon for 22nd June - Trinity 5.

“Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

In the TV sitcom *Keeping Up Appearances*, the heroine Hyacinth Bucket (pronounced “Bouquet”!) took the business of being seen to be posh to new heights. The reason it was funny, of course, was that nearly all of us knows someone with a bit (or a lot) of Hyacinth in them. How many of us, as children, were exhorted by our mother always to wear a clean pair of knickers in case we were knocked down by a bus? Surely children everywhere have puzzled over this concern for our underwear. Was keeping up appearances more important, even, than our health and safety?

Keeping up appearances is all mixed up with fashion - the need to wear the latest thing. And peer pressure is much like keeping up appearances - following the pack, carrying a knife or taking the drugs the rest of the gang do! It is the pressure to wear designer trainers when the parents can scarcely afford the ordinary ones!

We may feel we live in a less formal society now but, in honesty, we’ve all felt the pressure of keeping up appearances from time to time, whether it’s trying to say the politically correct thing, or being seen by our friends to have the right type of organic, fair-traded or non-air-freighted food in our cupboards. Oh, these are all good things, but let’s be honest – there is a fine and rather blurry line between **being** a decent and upstanding member of society and being **seen** to be one. The pressure to keep up appearances is still there; it always is.

Appearances deceive - isn't that the point? In the Army there was always Bull - and Drill. At one level it was all outward show. But gradually it seeped into us - it became a way of life and we found that we did always walk upright - in fact if a

soldier was to work undercover in Northern Ireland he had to re-learn how to slouch. And the cleanliness of the kit became not just appearance - it became a life changing and life saving habit.

But without that sense of self discipline, that inward strength - appearances can take us to hell in a hand cart.

A Jewish Story called "Bad Business" from A Treasury of Jewish Folklore Stories, goes like this:

The Evil One once came dejected before God and wailed, "Almighty God -- I want you to know that I am bored -- bored to tears! I go around doing nothing all day long. There isn't a bit of work for me to do!"

"I can't understand you," replied God. There's plenty of work to be done only you've got to have more initiative. Why don't you try to lead people into sin? That's your job!"

"Lead people into sin!" muttered the Evil One contemptuously. "Why Lord, even before I can get a chance to say a blooming word to anyone they have already gone and sinned!"

It was just like that in first-century Palestine too. There were strict codes of behaviour that had the double-edged effect of both helping people to operate as good citizens by defining what was bad and what was good, but mere observance covered up all sorts of other behaviour that Jesus condemned so fiercely - he calls those people 'whitewashed tombs' - nice coat of paint on the outside and really vile stench and decay inside.

Jesus upset the applecart, and as a result many vilified him as a lout and troublemaker. His behaviour was seen as defiantly antisocial, and he suffered both verbal and physical persecution as a result. They tried to stone him and the Pharisees were constantly sniping at him.

And so we join the story today at the point where Jesus begins to prepare his disciples to carry on his work (a foretaste, of course, of the task of every Christian), and to suffer the same things that he suffered. To their society the disciples were going to seem like fools, whingers, crackpots and inciters of antisocial behaviour – appearances were definitely not going to be kept up. The very fabric of society would be threatened, and, as a result, they would suffer the same verbal and physical persecution that Jesus did.

Jesus' message to the disciples is that appearances are of the least concern when the integrity of the soul is at stake. Simple! But although Jesus' words are straightforward – retain your respectability at the cost of integrity and lose your soul – his call not to be afraid shows that he knew that this was not a simple or easy thing to do.

Jesus' careful words show that he knew and understood how much the disciples had invested in their society, and how painful it would be to change it. It was their community after all. They may have been poor and lower class, but they were still part of it all. Challenging the whole nature of society by saying the God loves the untouchables as much as the Brahmins - to change country for a moment. The whole of the Hindu social system is designed so that some people are valued less than others. 'I know my place' was what the Frost report said. And *that* society still hasn't been liberated - it is still all judgement and appearances.

But Jesus is here saying that the role of the Christian in the world is to throw out the kowtowing to money or caste, and value all people equally.

Sometimes it seems that in our personal lives we can't win. We do our best to be decent, upright and adhere to the rules of society, and we find ourselves having to face the challenge that all we are doing is keeping up appearances. We try reinterpreting the Gospel to apply it to our life and time and we risk watering the message down; if we take it at face value it seems impossibly disruptive, and to oppose all that we do to be ordinary, decent people.

Well, sadly, there are no easy answers to this, and our challenge as Christian communities, filled with God's Spirit, is to work it out for ourselves. If there is an answer it comes from the uncomfortable place between being a good person and keeping up appearances – from a dialogue between the Pharisee and the radical that is in us all, and from honest conversation with one another about our aspirations and fears.

Jesus knew how painful it was to challenge the values of the community in which you've invested time, effort and love. He knew how much pressure there was on every decent person to keep up appearances. Let us pray for the courage to examine our own hearts honestly and to listen to our radical Lord.

The pressure to keep up appearances is strong, but the love and tenderness of our saviour is stronger.