Being special, being humble

In Psalm 139, David prayed 'I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made'.

Have you praised God because you're fearfully and wonderfully made?

In fact, that verse also be reasonably translated as 'I praise you because I am awesomely wonderful'.

Do you praise God because you're awesomely wonderful?

It doesn't seem right for us to pray that, does it?

Are you awesomely wonderful? If you look around, do you see awesomely wonderful people?

While we should all acknowledge that we all fall short of the glory of God, and as the old bumper sticker reminds us – "Christians aren't perfect just forgiven". We need reflect on David's prayer, and on Genesis 1, where God calls his creation 'good'. We are all indeed, 'special'. Special to God.

As followers of Jesus, we have this tension: God made us good – awesomely wonderful – but 'We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way' as Isaiah (53:6) tells us.

There's a danger, of course, in going to one extreme or the other: Boasting about our awesome wonderfulness… or wallowing in self-deprecation on the other.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus warns us about the danger of boasting and about hypocrisy – saying one thing, and doing another.

The reading itself comes at a key point in Matthew's gospel. It is the last time Jesus speaks publicly before his death. It follows the Jewish religious leaders – the priests, the scribes, the Sadducees and the Pharisees – attacking Jesus with trick questions and loaded questions, trying to catch him out and trying to entrap him.

Throughout this questioning, Jesus faithfully answered the questions, with wisdom and with scripture, and with an understanding that could not be equalled, and in ways that confounded his questioners.

But now the time for answering the questions, is over for Jesus. We read at the end of chapter 22 "and from that day forward no one dared to ask him another question." (22:46b). So he turns away from the Pharisees, and turns to the crowds and to his disciples…

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you

must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach." (23:1-3)

He's gone from talking to the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, to talking about them. He warns the people the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders, "do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach" (NIV).

Don't follow their example, no matter how awesomely wonderful they might think themselves.

But – and it's a big but - he still tells the disciples and the crowd to listen to them "So you must be careful to do everything they tell you".

That's not the way of the world, is it? Once hypocrisy is exposed, people stop listening to the hypocrite, don't they?

But the teachers of the law and the Pharisees are a special case, says Jesus, because "they sit in Moses seat". The Jewish tradition is that the teacher, the rabbi, sits down to teach.

When they are in the seat of Moses, they are teaching as Moses did. Bringing the Torah, first five books of the bible, "The Law" to the people. Saying "in Moses seat" is a way of saying "teaching consistently with Moses' teaching". Or I guess more broadly "teaching in accordance with scripture".

It's the same for us today – no matter what the sins of the preacher may be, no matter how hypocritical he or she may be – if their teaching is in accordance with scripture, we need to listen.

The problem with the teachers of the law and the Pharisees didn't arise when they were teaching from the seat of Moses, but when they were not.

Jesus said they tied up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves were not willing to lift a finger to help. (23:4)

It's not just a problem for religious leaders, is it? It's a huma thing: We put burdens on others, so that we can get ahead. We make others jump through hoops that we don't think we need to jump through ourselves.

The Jewish Law was like that – it had developed from the law that Moses knew, with each generation adding a bit more interpretation, a bit more detail, another safeguard. With good intentions, sure, but the law had become so complex that only a scholar could know all its ins and outs.

Think about the way our tax laws are developed – it's the same. A bit more interpretation, a bit more detail, another safeguard, and on it goes.

The commandments that had been given to the nation of Israel at Sinai, that set the nation apart as the people of God, had been used as the basis of a legal system that kept the elite in power, and the common people oppressed.

Of course, nothing similar would happen today, would it?

Jesus told his listeners that is was't burdening other people with rules they choose not to follow, hypocrisy, that their guilty of, but it was pride as well:

"Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honour at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called 'Rabbi' by others".

Both the phylacteries and the tassels were good things, they were ordained by God to remind the Jewish people of his saving grace, but they'd taken a good idea to a ridiculous extreme. If a phylactery was good, so they considered, then a bigger phylactery was better. If we should have tassels on our garments, then it must please God more if our tassels are longer, right?

Again, nothing similar would happen today, would it?

It is nice to be respected. It is nice to have the best seats reserved. But as teachers of the law, they should not have been claiming 'honour' for themselves.

And not only that, says Jesus "they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called 'Rabbi' by others. But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers." (23:7-8)

It is their pride which is the issue "they love to be greeted with respect… and to be called Rabbi" It isn't people calling them rabbi which is the issue, it's the pleasure they get from it.

Instead, Jesus tells the crowd – and probably particularly the disciples – that they are not to be called "Rabbi" because Jesus is the Teacher (and rabbi means teacher), and they are all brothers. Or to use more inclusive language, they are all equals.

In verse 9, Jesus tells us: "And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven."

There are modern traditions that reconcile their own use of titles such as 'rabbi' or 'father' these verses. The key to understanding these verses is, I think, that the use of such titles could be used not only elevate the importance of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, but it could effectively drag down regard for God. If that Pharisee is a father, and that scribe's a father – and that bloke over there's a father too it's so easy to start regarding our Father in heaven as just another father.

Jesus continues, “Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah.” (23:10) And he really harks back to the beginning of this reading – a warning about hypocrisy and about pride. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sat in the seat of Moses and should be listened to when they spoke in accordance with the scriptures – not simply because of the title or status they’d acquired. No matter how learned or respected or wise we may be, we must not elevate ourselves – or each other – over our saviour.

No matter how knowledgeable or eloquent or passionate a minister or preacher is, they’re not going to save us: Only Jesus is. They’re not the source of inspiration, no matter how inspiring their words are. Only the Holy Spirit is.

Those who lead and those who preach, lead and preach by the grace of God, and only by the grace of God.

Don’t rely on what I or others tell you about God: instead, test what we tell you against what the bible – does it match? Test it against what others have said – if it’s different, why is it different? Test it against your experience of God – is it consistent? And test it against your logic – does it make sense?

Jesus tells the crowd in verse 11 that “The greatest among you will be your servant.” What a profound statement that is. In our context we can understand it in all those acts of service that happen behind the scenes to keep our churches running and bind our communities together. People who help one another, people who prepare morning tea, people who maintain our buildings and facilities and people who pay our bills. People who serve the church - people who serve the gospel.

But we can also take that verse as Jesus talking about himself “The greatest among you must be your servant.” We talk about Jesus as *the servant king*. In Paul’s letter to the Philippians, we read:

…he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:7-8)

Jesus was the greatest among them, and yet he was their servant. Rather than piling heavy burdens on people’s shoulders like the scribes and the Pharisees, Jesus relieved people of their burdens – “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened […] For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt 11:28-30)

And he was their saviour. And he is our saviour

For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted .(23:12).

Once again, Jesus is talking about us, and also talking about himself. When we turn to God in repentance, when we humble ourselves before him, we are lifted up into eternal life in Christ.

And so it is to with Jesus: Paul tells us in Philippians (2:9-11)

[because he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death,] God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name.

We need to, just as Jesus did, humble ourselves in the face of the world. We are in need of forgiveness just as the rest of the world is – but if we are followers of Jesus, we have that forgiveness, through his death and resurrection. But let us not be arrogant in that forgiveness, because arrogance leads to pride and pride leads to hypocrisy.

Instead, let's be humble. Let's not boast of our Christian service or our giving or our compassion to others. Let's take away the hypocrisy people would criticise us for. Let's live as Jesus would have us live. Whether it's being generous with our time or cheerfully greeting people who come to Church, or being honest in all our dealings and not taking advantage of our positions, or praying for our enemies, or whatever it is.

Let's practice what we preach. Always.

But we don't do the right thing to earn favour with God, we do it because we have favour with God because of the sacrifice of Jesus once and for all, we do the right thing so that we can be his ambassadors in the world.

We are indeed created in the image of God. We are part of God's creation. We are fearfully and wonderfully made. We are saved by Jesus. But none of that is our doing, it's God's doing. We are indeed special, but we need to be humble.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast save in the cross of Christ my God… love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.

Amen