

1] What comes into your mind when you hear the word, Hypocrite? Perhaps you think of recent politicians and law-makers who do not keep the rules themselves. Maybe you think of religious teachers and leaders who secretly fail to practice what they preach. Or, could it be those who signal their 'virtues' via social media, delighting to be offended, yet blind to their own vices and lack of common sense.

2] In fact, the word Hypocrite has its origin in ancient Greek theatre, meaning an actor or performer on the stage. It is a compound of two nouns, meaning, an interpreter from underneath. That sounds rather strange, but if you recall that actors in the ancient world wore masks to represent the character they were playing, and also to project that character to the audience in the amphitheatre. Hence, we have the sad mask and the smiling mask, tragedy and comedy, as the symbol for the theatre in general.

3] In time the word, Hypocrite, came to refer to anyone just pretending to be something they were not. The word came into English through mediaeval French, and the earliest reference we have, is to be found in a religious text of the 13th century, describing someone who claims to be moral and religious, but in reality is a deceiver. Eventually, of course, we come to its current use, describing any person acting contrary to the beliefs, feelings and values that he promotes in front of others.

4] Today we have entered the season of the Triodion, the liturgical text that leads us through Great Lent and up to Pascha. This and the next three Sundays, until the beginning of the Fast, invite us to take off our own masks, to look at the person underneath. Last Sunday I spoke to you about looking at others through the mind of Christ, looking at the inside, at the heart. Now we must prepare to scrutinise ourselves.

5] It has often been said and, to a large extent it is true, that a society cannot function properly without a little hypocrisy. True, it only gives lip-service to common values and mores, but at least hypocrisy

acknowledges that shared moral beliefs are necessary. What if we always told the truth and were utterly frank and honest in our speaking? What of the husband who is asked by his wife whether he likes the new dress that she has bought? Or the parent who is asked to admire the latest work of art by its own child? What of the waiter in a restaurant, obsequiously polite to the customer whom he despises? And what of the laws that we readily obey but believe them to be immoral? Is this hypocrisy or just an avoidance of conflict; a case, once again, of discretion being the better part of valour?

6] So we come to that pharisee in today's parable. As a school of religious thinking, the Pharisee movement flourished during the time of the second temple in Jerusalem. Opposing the party of the Sadducees, they were against co-operation with the Romans. It favoured strict observance of the Law of Moses over the rituals and liturgical ceremonies of temple-worship. Pharisees were against the influence of Greek culture. Their culture was strictly Jewish, opposed to the more Hellenist Sadducees. Finally, they accepted the Oral Torah and the writings of the prophets and a wider canon of scripture, together with belief in the Resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees only accepted the written Torah. With the temple destroyed in 70AD, Pharisaic beliefs became the basis for Rabbinic Judaism that exists to this day.

7] The text of the gospel has that curious phrase, noting that the pharisee goes into the temple, '...and prayed thus with himself.' The Greek seems to imply that he prayed by himself, on his own, away from any possible contamination by mixing with others. He certainly wanted to be apart from that tax-collecting publican: publicans being, of course, more despicable than Sadducees in his eyes. They were ones who co-operated with the Roman Imperial system: contracted to collect revenue by a system called tax-farming, taking their share of the money they demanded, as they were not paid for their work. Excommunicated from the common wealth of Israel, we can imagine their social standing, wealthy but outcasts all the same.

8] Imagine this parable as a piece of ancient Greek theatre, by Aeschylus perhaps, if this is tragedy; or maybe it is a comedy by Aristophanes. Here, the pharisee puts on his mask and recites his

lines, declaiming that he is honest, true, upright, dutiful, pious and nothing like that other man on the stage.

9] Can this be true? If it is, surely it is only what is demanded of him from the Law of Moses? So why does he go down from Temple Mount unjustified before God? Because this is pure Aristophanes; this is comedy! And like all good jokes it fools us into expecting one thing, then surprises us with the actual outcome. It is the Tax-Collector, the sinner, who leaves justified, set right with God. Why? Because he has no hypocrisy, no mask to cover the real person within. He knows he has nothing to commend himself to the God of Israel. He is an extortioner, unjust, adulterous; indulgent, not ascetic; a lover of money, rather than a payer of tithes. All that he has to offer is his repentance. He has nothing else, not even a mask to hide behind. His only lines in the play are, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'

10] But why does this parable, this little drama, have such a surprise ending? As Christ also says in St Matthew's gospel, speaking of the Pharisees in general, 'Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.' [Matt.23:12] The supposed good works of the pharisee in the parable, it turns out, are not so much done in humble obedience to the Law of Moses but, rather, in hypocrisy, as a source of pride; a mask to bolster his own self-esteem. Humility has to be the measure of our true evaluation before God and others, whilst the passion of pride cuts us off from God and isolates us from others. No wonder the pharisee prayed apart, with himself, as it says.

11] Like the builders of the Tower of Babel, the proud works of one of them leaves him with just ruins, whilst the other, turning his life around, becomes acceptable to God. As the Lord says in the prophet Isaiah, 'But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, And who trembles at My word.' [Is.66:2]

12] Two weeks ago, we read from the chapter that follows on in St Luke's gospel: of Our Lord's encounter with an actual Tax-Collector, the diminutive Zacchaeus. Our Lord spotted him, high above in a sycamore tree, trying to see Christ above the crowd. I doubt if

Zacchaeus had much pride, having grown rich doing what he did. But like his fictitious colleague in the parable, he too came down; encountering God in the flesh, he repented as well.

13] So we come to the season for unmasking ourselves. When we sing in the Cherubic Hymn about, laying aside all earthly care, we refer not only to our worldly concerns, anxieties and worries, in order to fix our minds on the Holy Mysteries, but also to that care for our social standing; how we appear before the world, our concern for our status. For what really matters as we share in offering up the Church's sacrifice, is what the LORD sees in our hearts.

14] Once again, the Great Fast approaches, offering us an opportunity to rid ourselves of all pretence in our lives and to present ourselves face-to-face before Christ. Whether we be in the temple or at home before our icon-corner, let our prayer be without hypocrisy. And we have Confession, a remedy for pride and a means of grace to acquire humility. More than anything in this great spiritual endeavour that we are approaching now, we must seek to grow in humility. This is not some psychological low self-esteem that cripples minds damaged by life. We speak, rather, of a true understanding of what we are as creatures, unmasked before our Creator.

15] Let us end with these words of the monk, St Leo of Optina: 'For us who seek salvation, what is most needed is fulfilling the Divine commandments in humility, which attracts to us Divine Grace and illuminates all our actions, But without it no ascetic struggles and labours can bring us much desired peace.'