

Integrity: Living Life Inside Out

Matthew 23.1-12, 25-28

Simon Carey Holt

It was a proud moment. As I stood back to admire my handiwork, what I saw was nothing short of magnificent.

I was the lead chef in charge of a banquet for a thousand heart surgeons from around the world. They were gathered in the adjoining reception rooms sipping glasses of French champagne, waiting for the doors to the ballroom to open and for the feast to begin. And what a feast it was. Banquet tables laid out in four directions from the centre of the chandeliered room and heaving under the weight of more food than you can imagine. Tasmanian Oysters in their hundreds on ice, large red lobsters posed like royal mannequins, whole king snapper poised to swim across the tables, obscene amounts of caviar, calamari, prawns in six varieties, and scallops by the bucket loads. And then at the very centre of the feast, rising up as the visual crescendo of this culinary symphony, were two athletic dolphins leaping into the air. They were sculptured from ice. Poised like aquatic acrobats, these two creatures rose in unison into the centre of the ballroom. With soft blue lights positioned strategically to shine on them from every direction, my dolphins looked more real than reality itself.

That very morning, I had sat in the outdoor coolroom in my parker, with my chisel and hammer and two large blocks

of ice, each about as tall as me. A refrigerated artist, I chipped and chiseled away for an hour or more on each block. And here, in the middle of this magnificent ballroom stood the result. With just five minutes before the doors were set to open, I stood back to enjoy the view. It was good ... very good. But then, to my horror, I saw at the very centre of one dolphin what makes an ice sculptor sick at heart: a small crack. In a matter of seconds it raced from the centre, both up and down the length of the ice, and in one heart-breaking moment both of my regal dolphins came crashing down, disintegrating before my eyes, falling across the tables below and into a thousand wet slithers across the carpeted floor.

It turns out that one of my ice blocks had an internal weakness because of the freezing process. I should have picked it up in the coolroom that morning, but I didn't. And so, what appeared glorious

on the outside ended up in a wet slush on the ground; and with it my pride.

'The word integrity describes the state of being whole and undivided. It speaks of an internal consistency, where what is outside flows from what is inside.'

The Virtue

Today is our second Sunday on *Investments that Count*. Over six Sundays we are exploring values or virtues that lie at the heart of Christian character: last week *beauty*, today *integrity*.

One could say, I suppose, that my ice block lacked integrity. While it appeared strong on the outside, at its heart there

was weakness that no one could see, not until it was too late. Or one may conclude that my work as an ice sculptor lacked integrity. I was too consumed with the visual outcome of my work to notice the structural fault at its centre. But neither of those conclusions really gets at the heart of what integrity is.

The word integrity describes the state of being whole and undivided. It speaks of an internal consistency, where what is outside flows from what is inside. At its core, integrity is truth. As a virtue of Christian character, it moves us beyond the veneer of appearance and goes to the heart of who we really are.

To be honest with you, for a long time I've struggled with talk of integrity. For me the word has been more disempowering than inspiring, as though its sets the bar so high I stand before it feeling routinely inadequate. Typically, integrity is used to describe a state of perfection, a level of absolute correspondence between one's highest ideals and one's behaviour. Integrity has become an aspiration, a longing that one day I will be a person of the highest honour, one in whom there is no discrepancy between the holiness of Jesus and my own character. Integrity has become this high and lofty thing that sits out there, beyond me, a word of longing but not reality.

In my view, it's time to reclaim this word integrity. The most important step in that reclamation is the truth that integrity is so much more than aspiration. It is more than a character trait that sits high and out of reach. It is, in fact, a value that sits right in front of us. Integrity is a choice, a daily choice to live truthfully, honestly, and therefore humbly.

The Text

Matthew 23, from which today's reading is taken, is an astounding chapter full of the most passionate and biting words. As those who've come to understand these Pharisees as the villains of the gospel

story, we might even smirk self-righteously as Jesus speaks. Finally, these proud and arrogant Pharisees get the condemnation they deserve: 'woe to you, you hypocrites, you blind guides, you snakes, you brood of vipers, you whitewashed tombs full of bones and death.' Jesus is angry and his words cutting. What is it that makes Jesus speak with such heat? Hypocrites, he calls them. No less than five times in the chapter Jesus identifies their sin as hypocrisy, the complete absence of integrity. Note that Jesus' condemnation is not of their failure to be perfect. Rather it's their lack of truth, their lack of honesty, and consequently their lack of humility before God.

If integrity is most fundamentally to do with truth, then the integrity of leadership is evidenced most clearly when the leader is able to say, 'I am not perfect; I am strong and I am weak, I am able and I am frail, I succeed and I fail; this is who I am. I stand with you in need of grace.' Instead these religious leaders were consumed with maintaining the appearance of perfection, the outward signs of righteousness. So consumed were they that they paid no attention at all to the condition of their own hearts before God, let alone the hearts of the people in their care.

According to verse 5, the most pressing concern for these religious leaders was the size of their phylacteries and the length of their tassels. Both of these objects were intended to remind the Jewish people of the law of God. A phylactery was a small leather box, one tied to the forehead and another on the left arm. Each box contained selected passages from the Torah, the law of God. Similarly, tassels were tied to the four corners of the leader's robe as a reminder of the same law. Both were intended to be daily reminders of both of the law and grace of God—reminders of truth. And as such, both are good things. But instead, the Pharisees had allowed them to

become objects of pride: my phylactery is bigger than yours; my tassel is longer than your tassel.

The Challenge

Sadly, it is often the way with the religious people, and especially religious professionals like me. No matter what our tradition, we all have our phylacteries and tassels—those adornments through which we garner honour and respect. They come in many forms and we can use them in very much the same ways as the Pharisees did. Take me for example, the Rev Dr Simon Carey Holt, DipBs, BTheol, ThM, PhD, author, teacher, preacher, pastor. When I take away all the things I do, all the qualifications, all the titles of respect and office, all references to heritage and lineage, all I have left is Simon. But it is here that the journey to integrity begins.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with naming what I do for a living, with the credentials and the titles and the office. At their best our phylacteries and tassels, are reminders of God's grace, no matter what form they take. The problem comes when we begin to hide behind these things, find our worth in them, or even worse, pin them to our chest as a statement of superiority and pride. When polishing and displaying the outside of the cup becomes more important than addressing the dirt and dregs on the inside, we too stand guilty of hypocrisy. Integrity has to do with who I am, at the very deepest part of me. It's about character and truth-telling, and the courage and humility to name and own that truth.

Laid out on the communion table today is a collection of rocks, large ones and

small ones, smooth and rough. Rocks are a wonderful symbol of what integrity looks like. A rock is an honest thing. What you see is what you get. Beauty and imperfection go hand in hand. Each rock tells a story. The indentations, the cracks and crevices are all apparent. Nothing is hidden. From the surface to the centre, a rock remains absolutely consistent

My ice-sculptured dolphins were not really dolphins. Though they looked magnificent on the outside, it took just a crack to render the whole façade the fake that it was. While integrity is not about perfection, it is about truth. It's about living honestly and humbly with who we are. There is aspiration in

integrity—we long to be more like Jesus, we aspire to ever greater congruence between what we believe and who we are—but integrity is more than aspiration. Integrity is a choice that sits right in front of us, day in and day out. Integrity is truth, the truth of who God is and who we are. To live with integrity is to live honestly and humbly in that truth.

The choice for integrity is a choice we make as much at the breakfast table as at the communion table, a choice we make as much in the demands of our work as in our worship, a choice we make just as much in our neighbourhood relationships as in our personal times of prayer. And through these daily life choices, one after the other, day in and day out—one small rock piled on top of another—the Bible says we are transformed into the likeness of Jesus from one degree of glory to the next.

May that be so for all of us. Amen.


