

This morning's gospel reading is just a very small part of 'The Sermon on the Mount' which is recorded in the book of Matthew, chapters 5, 6 and 7. Here we have the manifesto of the Kingdom. It contains very high expectations, the most extreme moral standards ever expressed. As the Sermon on the Mount covers three chapters, it's highly unlikely that it was all preached on one occasion. At the beginning of Chapter 5, Matthew tells us that when Jesus saw the large crowds, he withdrew to the top of the mountain and his disciples followed him. Jesus goes up the mountain to give the disciples the law. Remember that the mountain was the place where the law was first given to Moses by God, and Jesus returns to a mountain top to renew their understanding of God's law. So Jesus begins to teach them: not just how to live, but the sorts of lives that belong in the kingdom of heaven; in fact the sorts of lives that become possible as the kingdom of heaven breaks in.

At our Explore Service last week, Jeanette talked about Jesus' teaching on salt and light. This morning's gospel reading follows on from that of last week and is the background against which Jesus gives some shape to his call that we are to be the 'salt of the earth...and the light of the world.'

The issues raised by Jesus in this morning's reading cover anger, adultery and lust, divorce and making promises that we don't intend to keep. All are important and complex issues and, because of this and the time factor, I'm going to concentrate on anger.

Jesus shows us that the Law of God, that is, his will for the way human beings should relate to one another, is not something that we, as Christians, can ignore. Jesus said: in Matthew 5, verse 17, 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.' Jesus wasn't tearing down the precious gift of God's law, which he had given to Moses all those centuries ago. Through his life, he showed us how the law of God should be lived – that is, from the heart.

Jesus doesn't criticise the Pharisees because they are interested in God's law, but because they've gone about things the wrong way. They were interested in the outcome; God was interested in the attitude. The Pharisees tried hard to obey the letter of the law, and failed. If we try the same approach we will also fail. Following God's law isn't a matter of not getting caught on the big things and ignoring the little failures. Take, for example, the commandment 'You shall not murder.' It was said to Moses by no less than God himself. So it's the authoritative word of God. 'But I say to you' Jesus says in verse 22 'There is more to this commandment than you've been taught. It's not just the act of murder that's the problem, but the attitude that leads to it.' You and I can sit here comfortably while Jesus talks about murder. But suddenly Jesus widens the net, and we're caught. 'If you are angry with a brother or sister you will be liable to judgement.' Who hasn't been angry? I confess that I often am, when I watch the England football team play! Who hasn't sworn or muttered about someone else, perhaps even a member of our church. What kind of impossible standard is Jesus laying down? It's not so hard to evade the letter of the law, to make ourselves as small a target as possible. Murder is a big thing. But anger? Everyone gets angry.

Jesus is not claiming here that all anger is sin. The Hebrew word for anger occurs 455 times in the Old Testament; 375 of these refer to the anger of God. Jesus got angry at times. In Mark, chapter 3, we have an example. One Sabbath Day in the synagogue Jesus met a man with a withered hand. Some of the Pharisees were standing around ready to condemn Jesus if he healed the man, because healing was considered to be work, and that was prohibited on the Sabbath. The Bible says, 'Jesus looked around at them with anger.' It hurt Jesus to see religious people caring more about their rules than the well-being of a human being. Jesus became angry when people got hurt or God's house was dishonoured. Jesus' anger was never selfish. St. Paul went so far as to commend anger. He wrote, 'Be angry but do not sin.' We ought to get angry about certain things. We call this kind of anger righteous indignation. It's godly anger, anger that motivates us to overcome injustice and extend mercy. That's not the kind of anger Jesus condemns in the Sermon on the Mount. He's attacking a much more common variety that lurks in all our hearts. This is selfish anger. This kind of anger, says the apostle James, (chapter 1, verse 20) "does not bring about the righteous life that God desires." Paul was referring to this emotion when he wrote in his letter to the Colossians, 'Put off all anger, wrath, and malice.'

So how do we avoid anger taking root in our heart? If we have committed ourselves to Christ, we know what is right and what is wrong. We know that which is life-affirming and that which is destructive. We should also pray with all our might that God will help us to deal with our anger and whatever there is in our life that could bring a blemish to our reputation or cause us to hurt someone else. We should remember that God is a God of healing and reconciliation, if we allow God to take control.

The Sermon on the Mount is God's ideal plan toward which we should never stop striving. Our inability to live this ideal means that all people stand before God on level ground. Because we do not measure up to these ideal standards, we have nowhere to turn but the safety net of God's absolute grace.

The good news is that the same Jesus who commanded those impossible standards is the one who forgave an adulteress, a thief on the cross, a disciple who had denied ever knowing him. The Jesus who called us to be perfect is the same one who paid the penalty on the Cross for the sins of imperfect people like you and me. The Sermon on the Mount is both absolute ideals and absolute grace, without one compromising the other. Only as we are healed by grace and equipped by the Holy Spirit can we grow toward the ideal of the Sermon on the Mount. God sees into the heart. He is showing us that our need for him and what he brings us is greater than we ever appreciated. We simply cannot obey God's law as natural human beings.

God's law, as Jesus teaches us here, forces us to examine ourselves. Jesus asks us to be honest about our deception, our self justification, in which we excuse our anger because we can't help it. He asks us to bring our failures out into the open, to repent of them and to aim for kingly values. Jesus asks us to remember that He died for us, so that our sinful failures would be forgiven. The reality of forgiveness means that we can honestly confront our failures and say, 'I'm sorry.' It's then that we are freed from our failures, to begin anew.

This passage, as with all of the Sermon on the Mount, offers wonderful hope. Jesus is not speaking these words merely to raise the bar. He isn't telling His listeners that the real problem with the Pharisees is simply that they haven't tried hard enough.

Jesus didn't say He came to make sure we fulfilled the Torah. He brings about true righteousness, something that turns out to be far deeper and more wonderful than merely conforming to rules or balancing merits and demerits. He came to make us new from the inside out. What we need is not our own righteousness, but Christ's in us.

Amen

Matthew 5, vs. 21-37
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