

The Third Sunday before Lent 2017

Sermon preached by the Reverend Canon Philip Banks

Sunday 12 February 2017

Proper 2 Year A: Matthew 5:21-37

In school assemblies I sometimes ask children what they think a cathedral building or church building is for. Do we need one? What are the different places for, such as the front or the altar? We usually get to the point about it being a place of prayer – above all a place where people can join together to come together as a family: the family of Jesus – for praise, to pray and to ask for the guidance of the Spirit.

Gathering in worship can be thought of as an *act of love*.

Either love expressed for God's goodness for all the blessings of our lives.

Or a yearning for God's love to enter in, into our lives and in into our world to bring healing.

Surely that's why we here today. And, having received God's blessing in love, we should become people of blessing – that's our vocation.

Leading lives, guided by the love of God, is what today's reading from Matthew's gospel is about.

If I say 'Sermon on the Mount' to you, most of you will probably think: "Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes: blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness".

You would be right of course: the gospel of Matthew, chapter 5. Most people don't then think about the next section of chapter 5 (today's gospel reading) and chapters 6 and 7, all of which form Jesus's long discourse which we call 'The Sermon on the Mount'.

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That's the context for the difficult, and quite challenging, words in today's gospel. Jesus moves on from the Beatitudes, and takes the commands of the Old Testament, and shows how they can show a way of living, of conducting our relationships, of 'being'.

Of being fully, genuinely, gloriously, really human.

Being the people God would have us be: people of love.

This new way which Jesus points to goes deep down into the roots of our personalities and our behaviours (or should do).

It is not enough, says Jesus, simply to say "whoever murders shall be liable to judgement". Rather I have to be much more self-aware, of the things going on inside me, that (taken to the extreme) might *lead* to murder. Hence Jesus begins with anger. When I'm angry I will be "liable to judgement" (the first phrase of the gospel reading today).

What judgement will I incur? That's not something in the future, awaiting me on some distant Judgement Day. Rather it is something which will begin to happen to me right now. Every time I decide to let my anger fester, I will gradually (if I but realise it) be belittling myself: I become less than the fully, genuine human being that God wants me to be.

There was a section of script in the film about the life of Margaret Thatcher (Iron Lady?) which has always stayed with me: I think it's a quote from Taoist philosophy:

Watch your thoughts for they become words.

Watch your words for they become actions.

Watch your actions for they become habits.

Habits form your character

Watch your thoughts. In other words: "what we think (if we are not careful) eventually we become".

St Paul underlines this in his letter to the Philippians, chapter 4: you will know these beautiful lines: “whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable... think on these things”¹.

In other words if our thoughts spring from love, we will become people of love.

Jesus gives simple advice about these things in the gospel reading today: “be reconciled – make friends – be in good relationships”: that’s more important than worship! We should be captivated by that notion!

Look at the gospel text: Jesus imagines someone going to the temple, and then remembering (not surprising when going into the presence of the one who is love) remembering some relationship that’s gone wrong. First of all, go: make friends, be reconciled. Only *then* come to the temple.

God wants to hear first about how we’re helping to heal relationships; only then wants to receive our worship.

‘Make friends; be reconciled’, says the Lord.

Perhaps a message to the White House about these deeply important Christian things would be good. But then springs to mind the other Taoist saying:

“those who *know* do not Tweet (speak);
those who speak do not *know*.”

The trouble is: how simple it is to say ‘be reconciled’ when, for most of us, how costly and hugely difficult it is! It involves abandoning my ‘pedestal of being right’, abandoning my wanting to be superior to the other person’s view! “Genuine humans” says Tom Wright, former Bishop of Durham, “don’t live on pedestals. They have their feet firmly on the ground on a level with everyone else.”²

(Why am I feeling faintly uncomfortable standing up here!).

A further thought about relationships.

Jesus’s words about divorce in today’s reading feel quite stark in our 21st-century world.

Most of us here probably have experienced divorce either directly ourselves or through our families and friends. Yet these words of Jesus our about love too.

It hardly needs saying that divorce and relationship breakdown is always painful, always a tragedy. The consequences eat away:

- at parents looking on at their children’s marriage breakdowns, because as parents we want our children to be happy and at peace;
- at children in unhappy broken families which can have consequences well into their futures;
- not to mention the stress for one or both partners which can bring so much grief and unhappiness.

So we know in our heart that it’s not what God desires.

But we also know the reality – that marriages do go wrong – because either one or both (or in fact all of us) are not the fully mature, wise people that we could be,

- either to make the right marriage choice in the first place
- or, once married, to be the fully loving, God-centred people we might be to make a healthy marriage.

So of course there is a mechanism in scripture for divorce: “write a certificate” we heard in the reading.

However, these words of Jesus are directed at challenging the accepted, religious, male-dominated practice of the time. A practice where technically a man could – and (scholars say) often did – keep divorcing several times, effectively leading a life of serial monogamy, which was technically acceptable under religious rules.

No wonder Jesus said “anyone who divorces his wife causes her to commit adultery”

What Jesus was asking, then in that age and asks us now, is that we should always try to see God's original purpose of love for us. Jesus always wants to point us back to the purpose for which we were made: that we should be a blessing to others: that our vocation as Christians is that we should be a *people of blessing*.

Jesus presents us with an ideal. A vision how life could be if we were but whole people. So, yes, there's teaching on marriage and divorce and relationships; but – just as absolute, is Jesus's teaching on

- ‘selling your goods and giving to the poor’³: which of us does that well?
- or ‘denying yourself and taking up your cross’⁴: which of us does that well?
- or, at the end of chapter 5 in Matthews gospel, Jesus says ‘be perfect, as your father in heaven is perfect’! ⁵

On all those counts we fall short of the mark.

One failing – divorce – isn't worse a sin than another.

Remember ‘judge not, lest ye be judged’⁶; and, to the woman caught in adultery: ‘he who is without sin should cast the first stone’⁷.

Which draws us back to where we started: That the Christian family, as we meet here in this building in an act of love,

love of God

loves for each other

love for the world and it's people,

always knowing that we are not very good at it,

but knowing God's eternal love for us, however much we fail,

knowing that God is leading us, in love, on our pilgrimage through life.

As today's beautiful opening prayer (the Collect) has it:

may we be people who are given grace

to love what God loves,

that our hearts may surely there be fixed

where true joys are to be found

in Jesus Christ our Lord. ⁸

Philip Banks, February 2017

[check against delivery]

¹ *Philippians 4:8*

² *Tom Wright, Matthew for Everyone, 2004 SPCK, page 44*

³ *Matthew 19:21*

⁴ *Matthew 16:24*

⁵ *Matthew 5:47*

⁶ *Matthew 7:1*

⁷ *John 8:7*

⁸ *Collect, Church of England Common Worship, Third Sunday before Lent (based on the original collect in BCP 1549, 1552 and 1662 for Easter 4 and translated from the Latin of the Gelasian Sacramentary).*