

ADDRESS

19 February 2017

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

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Leviticus 19.1-2, 9-18	Holiness
Psalms 119.33-40	God's statutes
1 Corinthians 3.10-17	The true foundation
Matthew 5. 38-48	The way to live

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*Lord, grant that we may always find more light and more truth in your holy word. AMEN*

I have always been uncomfortable with today's Gospel -- especially the first part of it: turn the other cheek, go the second mile, give to everyone who begs from you. 'What would happen to me if I followed this advice, all the time? What would happen to the world, if everyone lived this way?'

OK, if everyone lived like this, the world would be transformed -- transformed into a world of grace, rather than a world of law, a world of tit for tat revenge, a world of a few rich and many poor. But if only a few people lived like this, other people would take advantage of them.

Coles and Woolworths brought in self-service checkouts to save them money on wages and to help people finish their shopping more quickly. Now they are limiting the number of purchases at these checkouts, some stores are even putting security guards on duty there, because a few people are using them to steal from the store. O, if only everyone were honest, like us!

Being human, when someone upsets us, we want to do them harm. We hear of a child being murdered, or abused, or a wife being bashed up, the human response is *lock them up and throw away the key; kill them before they kill someone else*. The Old Testament law that Jesus quoted was meant to check this call for unbridled revenge by making the punishment fit the crime.

Jesus goes even further, his call is for love without limits. The examples he gives are drawn from the society of his own day -- it's when we try to apply them to our own day without knowing the historical background. that we become uncomfortable.

*If anyone strikes you on the right cheek turn the other also*. In Jesus' day, a slap across the face was a gross insult, the ultimate sign of contempt. We still use the phrase in a figurative sense, don't we? : *the way the boss dismissed my suggestion was a real slap in the face*. Old Hollywood movies show us a girl rejecting an unwanted approach with a slap across the guy's face. In today's movies, she is more likely to shoot him.

In Canberra, Question Time often becomes a time of responding to insult with insult; the media love it, but the taxpayers who pay pollies' salaries might prefer that they turned the other cheek, and got on with their job of running the country. By refusing to respond to an insult, we make the insulter look a bit silly. Turning the other cheek, responding with love, makes him look worse.

In Jesus' day, a man could lose his outer garment, his coat, if he pledged it as security for a loan. By then, he had lost everything but the clothes on his back. All he had left to cover his nakedness was his inner garment, his cloak. If he handed this over he would be naked, and seeing someone naked was more shameful in Jewish culture than being seen naked. So Jesus is not saying, *When someone steals your mobile phone, give him your wallet as well.* He is saying, by offering him more than he demands, you expose his avarice, his lack of mercy, to himself, and to others.

We've all heard that Roman soldiers had the right to demand that anyone who was not a Roman citizen had to carry their heavy gear for a mile. Jesus says, offer to carry it a second mile, as one human being helping another. Jewish law taught, *Love your neighbour.* Jesus' message is *Everyone is your neighbour, love without limits.*

And so on. Jesus says *Give to everyone who begs from you.* He does not say *Give them what they ask for.* He says *Meet their need.* So, in the third chapter of the book of Acts, we hear that a crippled beggar approached Peter and John as they were about to go into the Temple. Peter responded, *I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you,* and he healed him of his infirmity, in the power of the Risen Jesus. That is what he really needed.

Our last parish was Brisbane cathedral, and the cathedral staff were continually being approached by people asking for money. The Dean's policy was in the spirit of Jesus: *If someone asks for money for a cup of coffee, give them a cup of coffee, and a biscuit or a sandwich as well. If someone asks for money to buy a train ticket to Ipswich, go to the station with them and buy them a ticket to Ipswich. And ask if we can help them in any other way.* "That is, offer to meet their need, and more, but don't just give money, which might be used to buy alcohol or other drugs'.

What would happen if we extended this second-mile policy to opinions and ideas, as well as to actions? If we not only simply tolerated other people's ideas we don't agree with, but actually looked into them? If we studied what Islam actually teaches instead of uncritically condemning what we think we know? If we examined the policies of the political parties we don't support, rather than simply saying 'that wouldn't work'? If we looked more deeply into the theology of people we don't agree with rather than digging in and insisting 'I know what I believe' and 'they are wrong'? In Jesus' teaching there is no 'us' and 'them'

Last week Peter spoke to us about the nature of ministry, based on the epistle reading, which was part of Paul's letter to the church in Corinth. The passage continues in today's reading. Some of you know that I spent more than five years studying 50 years of the politics of Sydney diocese, with the support and encouragement of Bishop Forsyth. One of my cupboards is filled with tapes from interviews with clergy, including the former bishop of North Sydney, Glen Davies, and dozens of others. We talked about the process by which this diocese has moved from dominantly

mainstream, liberal, liturgical, evangelical Anglicanism to a distinctly more conservative evangelical position, with a more literal understanding of the Scriptures, to the point where the former Archbishop could declare, in Synod, *I am Calvinist before I am Anglican*.

This was a tough intellectual journey, but it did show me, among other things, how remarkable this parish is, and how distinctive Peter's leadership is. This is a parish we should all be proud to invite people to join in their search for a closer relationship with God, not only because it is so warm but also because it is so inclusive.

Many parishes have what we have: an early liturgical, sacramental service, followed by a later family service, a non-liturgical service, in which the Lord's Supper is celebrated only once a month. A few parishes continue with multiple sacramental services. But I know of no other Sydney parish where the early liturgical, sacramental service is stronger than the later free-form service, and where the minister supports both services and tries to embrace ideas he doesn't really agree with. We know from Peter's sermons where his theological heart lies, but he does not shut down dissenting ideas, as many clergy do.

In many Sydney parishes the early service is held in the church, with little support from the minister, while the family service is held in the hall or in a brand-new auditorium, with all the latest sound equipment, but with nothing 'churchy' -- no table and no cross, and definitely no candles! And with about as much aesthetic appeal as a university lecture theatre. In one parish, at least, the auditorium has been built on another site, so that the parish is split into two communities; one is supported, the other is simply tolerated, believing that it will just die out, as many others have.

For all of us, as we sang earlier, *the Lord has still more light and truth to break forth from his Word*.

Chapters 5 to 7 of Matthew's Gospel is presented as a single sermon of Jesus, but is more likely to be a collection of his teachings given at various times during his ministry, and perhaps given more than once. That does not detract from their power, and their challenge. From the specifics of doing more than the law or custom requires, the sermon as we have it moves on to the principle behind them: *Be more like God. Love without limits. Love even your enemies and those who persecute you. Be as generous to others as God has been to you.*

Matthew tells us that Jesus has been called, he has been baptised, he has been acknowledged as the Son of God, he has been tempted, he has begun his ministry and called on others to join him. Now he tells the crowd how followers of King Jesus can live the life of the kingdom of heaven in a critical and unbelieving world. Until Jesus returns, we will not see the whole world transformed, but we can transform our own world, by learning to love without limits.

This what makes Christians different from other people. So often you hear people say, *She or he is a good Christian, always helping other people.* Of course, that is part of it. But a good Christian is more than a good person -- a good Christian strives to be more like the God revealed in Jesus Christ, the God who loves without limits, who makes the sun rise on the evil as well as on the good and sends rain on the unrighteous as well as the righteous.

During the years that I was a member of the Lions club of Chatswood, I knew that few of the Lions went to church regularly, but we all worked together to make things better for some of the many local people who needed help.

What Jesus is doing, in today's passage, is what he does so often: he is fulfilling the Jewish law he was so familiar with by expanding its reach. So chapter 9 of Leviticus (verse 17) tells us that *you shall not hate anyone of your kin. . . .but you shall love your neighbour as yourself.* In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells us that everyone is our kin. Everyone needs and deserves our love.

Verse 46 has two rhetorical questions that go to the heart of Jesus' message. *For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?* The Greek *azpazomai* tells us that 'greet' means so much more than say 'Hello'. It means 'greet warmly', 'embrace', 'welcome' – Paul uses the word 21 times in one chapter of his letter to the church in Rome.

This is how Christians should treat everyone, not just their friends, but even their enemies. Yes, it takes a lot of doing. We can practice by joining people we don't know so well at morning tea, instead of always sitting with our particular friends, but we need to go far beyond this.

As we know, in Jesus' day, the so-called 'publicans' would collect taxes for the Roman government and keep the difference between what they collected and the amount the Romans had demanded. Because they worked for the occupying power, and often made themselves rich in the process, tax collectors were the most despised people in Jewish society. Yet even they loved anyone who loved them. That is human, that is natural -- Jesus calls us to be super-natural, to learn to love people we don't even like, to learn to love people who don't like us, which is even harder, to become more like God.

For our reading ends where all sermons should end, with God rather than with us. We are called to be *telos*, perfect, mature, what God made us to be, called to be more like the God who made us. We all have a long way to go, and none of us can make progress without God's help.

Let us pray. *Lord we believe. Help us in our unbelief. Help us to grow more like you day by day and to learn to love without limits. AMEN.*