

The seventh Sunday of ordinary time

23 February 2025

Message – Invincible love and unending mercy

Creator, Redeemer, Giver of New Life, help us to see with your eyes, and to embrace all your children. **Amen.**

Our gospel reading is a part of the sermon on the plain. A far shorter sermon than the sermon on the mount in Matthew's gospel but appearing to draw on the same material with some heavy editing by one or both of them.

The sermon on the plain summarises, for the newly appointed apostles, other disciples, the crowd, for Luke's audience and for us what it means to be a follower of the way of Christ, to be a part of the new people of God.

In the place of the beatitudes, we have four blessings and four woes, proclaiming the arrival of God's new creation. The sermon then moves to the fundamental characteristics to be found in followers of the way, an attitude of invincible love, seen in loving our enemies, and unending mercy, seen in being non-judgemental; the same love and mercy with which God cares for us. The sermon finishes with the importance of following the principles of love and mercy.

The exact delineation of the sections is open to debate, as is whose version is closest to it. The thrust of the sermon is far less open to debate. It makes for uncomfortably challenging reading. The way of Jesus, and for followers of the way, is very different from the way of the world.

Embedded in the teaching on love is the Golden Rule, 'Do to

others as you would have them do to you.' This Golden Rule is common to most world religions. It predates Jesus. For example, the Rabbi Hillel, who died around ten years after Jesus's birth, is famous for saying: *What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbour: that is the whole Torah; while the rest is the commentary thereof; go and learn.'*

Many religions promote the Golden Rule but there are substantial differences in how it is understood. Jesus's interpretation is fundamentally different from the Torah. In the law of the Hebrew Scriptures, the behaviour of others substantially governs our behaviour towards them. We are not expected to love our enemies; there is a significant degree of reciprocity, though I think it can be argued that there was also supposed to be a high degree of generosity towards others. Nonetheless, there was always a right to restitution for harm done.

Jesus says not only are we not to seek restitution for harm done to us but we are to show invincible and unending goodwill towards those who hurt us. We are always to assume the best of them and that their need is genuine. The behaviour of others does not govern the behaviour of followers of the way of Jesus. We are to be constant, just as God is constant, always showing love.

The application of this is not simple. As Leon Morris expresses it, *'If Christians took this one absolutely literally there would soon be a class of saintly paupers, owning nothing, and another of prosperous idlers and thieves.'* (TNTC, 143)

There are of course other commands and principles we must consider, for example, we are called to be good

stewards of all that we have. Allowing others to squander the good gifts that God has given is not good stewardship. The rule of law is also there for the care of all. The underlying principles of the Torah also remain in place, particularly the need to address inequality and to protect the most vulnerable in society.

However, it is in our personal relationships where there is the greatest possibility for great generosity and not passing on the hurts we absorb from others. It is possible to have an attitude of radical openness to our opponents and enemies. There will be a cost but there is also the reward of being a part of God's people and God's new creation.

This attitude of openness is also to be reflected in how we judge others. We will be judged by the same measure with which we judge. You will note that Luke does not specify who is doing the judging, it could be God, it could be other people. It is probably both. Reflecting the love of God, we must be forgiving as God is forgiving towards us.

Given these principles of love and grace, people have high expectations of churches and of Christians. Some of the behaviour we see can in no way be considered a part of the way of Jesus of Nazareth, the way of the cross.

We remain frail human beings and we will not always get things right. While it is not specified in the sermon on the plain, when we are the ones who cause hurt to others, we will need to seek forgiveness from them and from God. True repentance will be seen in a change in our behaviour. Actions speak louder than words.

The divisions among Christians and the way in which those

divisions are maintained do not reflect the gospel. For many people outside the Church, this is a major stumbling block. It is not that they outright reject the way of Jesus and the priority for love and a non-judgemental attitude in their lives. It is rather that they reject the church as the custodians of that way.

Non-Christians can see that our lives do not reflect the standards we proclaim. If there is a new way of being, it should be visible in our lives. The sermon on the plain leaves no room for debate. It concludes with the tree and its fruit and the two foundations.

The fruits that are seen in our lives and in the community life of the church are not perceived to be all that they should be. Those welcomed into the new creation are the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those who are rejected for being followers of the way of Christ.

To the outsider, it too often seems the church rejects the poor, the hungry, those who weep and even those who are prepared to embrace the radical nature of the gospel. Plenty of patients in the hospital who have a strong personal faith seek out chaplaincy trusting that a chaplain will offer unconditional goodwill and be non-judgemental, despite their experience of the church. Being apologetic for the church is not quite what I think apologetics is supposed to be but it is often the role of the chaplain.

Not only does the church appear to exclude the very people whom Christ welcomed, but it appears to be judgemental in a way that is profoundly un Christ like.

Last week I had a conversation with someone who no

longer goes to church because he can't reconcile the gospel with how judgemental the people of his church are. He still believes in God. He still gives thanks to God. He still trusts God. But the church, not so much. While I would have loved to say not all churches are like that, I also know how easy it is for people to be wounded again, and again.

My experience of non-church communities tells me that we are better than we might be but that we also have room to improve. We don't always get the welcome here right but I know there are people who look for the newcomer and the stranger. We just need a few more, could you be someone who looks out for unfamiliar faces and welcomes them.

In our community the work of the food bank, the night shelters and Anglican Action are great examples of our faith in action. However, their work is primarily as an ambulance at the bottom of the cliff. Anglican Action also does work to look at how systems might be changed to prevent people ending up at the bottom of the cliff. We have done a little of this in the past, we need to do more.

Showing the invincible love of God for our enemy and our friend alike, is not easy. It is costly. Being nonjudgemental towards others is difficult, we all want to say, *'it's not fair.'* The parables of the prodigal son and the workers in the vineyard both address this. But what really matters is that the rewards for managing both are incalculable, it is the gift of life in all its fullness for us, and potentially for those we love and for those we struggle to love.

Be love, just as your God is love.

Be merciful, just as your God is merciful.