

**St P&P 8.00am and 10.00am**

30.10.11

Matthew 5. 1-12

*Loving Heavenly Father, help us now we pray, as we study your word and seek to make your truth a living truth in our daily lives, in Jesus name, Amen*

Well -it's been a funny old week. Thursday saw me travelling into London with Bishop Alan. We had an invitation to coffee from Giles Fraser and we thought we'd just go and see for ourselves what was really going on.

Happens Giles was otherwise occupied!

We hung around a bit, read all the posters -some of them very sharp indeed and then met Katherine -the woman who has organised the flash Evensongs outside the cathedral. (ace woman by the way -a serpent player no less!) Alan being Alan got invited to take part on Friday and thus began an interesting old story which I guess will still have some miles to cover.- Listen to the World at 1.00 this lunch time!

We are taking the All Saints readings this morning -and hence the Beatitudes -and it's the same theme as last week. It really, really matters what you *do* -not just what you say.

If you tell the world that you are a Cathedral in the very centre of the nation's financial centre and you are there to facilitate a discussion about national issues -this is what it says in it's own web-site:

.....runs a programme of events including public debates exploring Christian life and spirituality whilst **St Paul's Institute** seeks to bring Christian ethics to bear on our understanding of finance and economics.

If you say that about yourself -and then close the doors and shut down all debate when real-life issue raise their head in a practical way -is it any surprise that people wonder what on earth the church is really about?

It doesn't get more embodied than this. We say we have a gospel -good news about who we are and how we live. Well -lets actually do it!

Open the doors -give the protestors a square meal and host an engaged , informed , lively, risky debate. The public stage is there -the press, indeed the nation is watching -what values can we show?

What about the whole world of justice and equality? What about ethical trading? What about that burning question ‘what good does it do to gain the whole world and lose yourself –your real self?

As someone rather sharply pointed out in the Church Times this week: ‘We must be alert , lest Jesus be fond in those chilly tents rather than within the closed doors behind them.’

The Sermon the Mount puts in front of us the way in which we as followers of Jesus are to live together and to live in society.

Its not that easy a text to tackle actually. For a start, it’s highly unlikely that Jesus actually sat down at one given time and gave all this wisdom as one sermon. Comparing the version found in Luke with this one in Matthew it is fairly clear that what we have is a collection of insights that Jesus shared over the years. Luke and Matthew gathered them together in a slightly different way because they wanted to emphasise different aspects of Jesus’ teaching.

Secondly, and more challenging is the question of how exactly you set about reaching the meaning of these famous words.

We’ve probably all come with our preconceptions. I, for example have been influenced by a famous series of sermons by John Stott which I heard at All Souls Langham Place as a student and which he then compiled into a well know book ‘Christian counter culture’

You may have heard all sorts of interpretations -but a common theme which emerges -one with which you may well identify -is:

“Help!! Its all too holy, too humble, too other worldly, too perfect!”

“Whatever these verses mean, they are not realistic for little old me.”

Fair comment.

If you start with the premise that Jesus is giving us a new law to live by - an easy supposition to make as far as Matthew is concerned, because he

is so keen to make the link between the old and the new law -if you start there, then you're in trouble.

Because it is not a law that your average Christian could ever make a practical guide to living. When you've got a mortgage to pay off and five mouths to feed, it's impossible not to be anxious about 'what you shall eat and what you shall wear' and it would be irresponsible for you to 'give to everyone who asks'. As for 'not looking at a woman with desire', it's difficult to understand how you would get three kids in the first place if you took that one seriously.

So is this sermon only for super-saints?

Clearly not.

I think we need to take a different tack.

The root of it all is the massive change in the nature of 'law' between the old and new testaments. The old law -which Matthew refers to -and which was given for our good -was a written code -a set of rules to be fulfilled. By doing what they instructed you demonstrated your allegiance to God -you were doing his will, you were one of his followers.

In the New Testament the will, the Law of God is now expressed in the character of Jesus.

Therefore, obedience to that law means not the systematic application of legal prescriptions, but participating in the character of Jesus.

Well, I'm sorry if this has been a little dense up till now, but I hope its helpful to think about just what sort of a message we are trying to get from this famous passage.

Lets get to the fun part.

If what we have before us is a portrayal of the character of Jesus, then when we see that character, we see what sort of attitudes and deeds should be those we would seek to share if we want to share in the character of Christ.

These are not school rules.

This is more a wonderful vision of what it could be to be human - personified in Jesus.

It is a vision which we can hold onto in the faith, indeed the expectation, that the Holy Spirit is gradually forming us in that image. Of course we won't get to be like Jesus in our life time, but - and I think this is very important - we can develop a real longing to become that sort of a person. It is that shift in our aspirations, that God-given understanding of what is good and beautiful about a person that begins the change in us.

So what exactly is this character?

Well - here's one way of looking at it.

Five features of loveliness:

1. An ability to love with no strings attached. No pay-back required. No need to deserve your love - to be good enough to love. No more 'I would love you so much more if only you would ... spend less money, stop drinking, give me more hugs, stop shouting at the children'

An ability to love your wife/husband/child/friend as the person they are, not the person you want them to be.

2. An ability to live in such a way that you yourself do not occupy the centre stage. To be able to say, 'although this is not how I see it, yet I honour and affirm your way' to understand that you are one of the millions of people on this earth, and that your worth is no less, and no more than theirs, in the eyes of God.

3. An ability to trust in God's good providence. To feel that, however tough and painful life might be, at times, you are held securely and eternally in the loving hands of God.

4. An ability to recognise and turn away from what is evil, self destructive, cruel and life denying. To hate that which is sin in you and though you may fall, to seek forgiveness and turn your face away from what is wrong.

5. An ability to cultivate an interior (as opposed to an external and formalistic) adherence to God's commandments - his master plan - in other words, to see, recognise in Jesus - the way, the truth and the light, and then to set your path to follow him.

Now what is immediately apparent is that all this then is a matter of what is going on inside you. It is a matter of your orientation.

And..... you may think this is controversial -but think about it for a moment.....

Outside St Paul's the most commonly seen poster is 'What would Jesus do?' The protestors are not by any means universally Christians -and yet to them this is the most pertinent question. This is because the sermon on the mount is telling us truths that a supra religious. They are about humanity -'God so loved the world.....

.....these attributes are not specifically Christian. It would be possible to mould one's personal, social and political conduct on these standards without having ever read the Sermon on the Mount. That does not detract from their validity: rather, it underlines the fact that the demands that Jesus makes of his followers logically (because he is the creator) logically coincide with the authentic human yearning for a truly humanised society -what Jesus calls 'the kingdom of God'

Finally, as with all that Jesus says to us -the rub is on the inside. Of course we should act in certain good and loving ways - but the act is the dead letter of the law unless it springs from a right heart. The point is this: in all the confused and passionate debate about ethical and social issues in our own day, could it not be that the **one** thing that is lacking is an insistence on pure and selfless motives. This is a dimension of ethical thought which looms very large in the Sermon on the Mount. Perhaps this 'inwardness' of ethical thought is something which Christians should be contributing to the debate, for the good of all. Please support Bishop Alan -look out for places where we can engage with the common concerns of today -work at being relevant and connected -what we actually **do** matters.

So please don't find the Sermon on the Mount discouraging. The standards *are* extremely high -but if you treat it as a glimpse into the character of Christ -then you can make your daily prayer one of longing to become -by the power of the Holy Spirit -more and more like him. That, I believe is the true call of these verses to our hearts this morning. Amen

Rosie Harper 3/11/02