

Sermon 20Feb2022

Luke 6:27-38 Radical Love

Last week Francis brought to us the challenging message of Jesus to his followers: That in God's Kingdom, in the world where God reigns, woe will come to those who like things the way they are and do well in today's world, who have resources, and are well liked, and successful, while those who don't have options, who are at the bottom of the heap in today's world, and especially those who are ostracized or persecuted for doing things the Jesus way – they are the ones who will be blessed in God's kingdom. This is the shape of God's kingdom, the kingdom which turns the world upside down – or rather the right way up.

I hope you've taken time to think about how that might work in your life, how you can overcome the hurdle we face of being rich in resources and options, rather than having to trust in God; the disadvantage of being satisfied rather than hungry, the distraction of a world which seeks personal happiness and values feeling good. Have you considered how you could be hated as Christians who don't hold to the worldly measures of success and happiness? Jesus is quite blunt about these things.

You may have come up with some ideas as to how to tip the worldly circumstances on their head and live in such a way that you have to trust in God and not the ways of worldly human society. The continuation of Jesus' sermon on the plain also fleshes out examples of how to do this. But first I want to look briefly at our reading from Psalm 37.

Our first reading today gives us assurance that living God's way of justice, righteousness, seeking his will and trusting him completely will lead to our comfort, security and joy, even when it looks like the worldly ways of injustice lead to greater prosperity and happiness. Vv 1-2 I know the core verse here is a favourite with many here. 5 Commit your way ... However we, I think, tend to look at it a bit out of context, - if I pray each day that God will look after me and I try to do the right thing he will look after me and what I do will work out well for me. Yet the context here in this passage presupposes the same context Jesus was talking about in the first part of his sermon we were looking at last week. The context, then as now, was a world where there are major injustices, where some are poor with no options and others, who are part of the wealthy minority and who play by the rules of society – exploitation, hoarding for oneself, people pleasing – especially the right sort of people, status-seeking, disregarding the ways of God. – where those people seem to be on top and have all the prosperity and happiness. This psalm makes the same promises that Jesus was making – that those who live according to God's ways of justice and righteousness, who trust in him and put him first in the practicalities of life – they are committing their ways – their whole lifestyle - to God and would be vindicated in his Kingdom.

So let's consider the next part of Jesus' sermon now. This whole sermon was given to his disciples. Now he continues to those who were listening. I wonder how many were still listening after that first part?

It begins with the command – Love your enemies! – one of the most well known commands of Jesus. But this part of his sermon is not a comprehensive list of ethical commands. Rather it is a set of case studies – a set of representative examples of how the first part of his sermon is worked out. The basis of all these are summed up in verse 36 – you must be merciful just as your father is merciful. These are examples of mercy in action.

You may have heard the simple definitions: Mercy is not getting what you deserve and grace is getting what you don't deserve. The sort of mercy that is being pointed to here is the mercy God offers in giving a way to turn back from our disobedience and it's consequences towards being under his reign.

This kingdom that Jesus preached and lived was all about a glorious, uproarious, absurd generosity. Think of the best thing you can do for the worst person, and go ahead and do it. Think of what you'd really like someone to do for you, and do it for them. Think of the people to whom you are tempted to be nasty, and lavish generosity on them instead. These instructions have a fresh, springlike quality. They are all about new life bursting out energetically, like flowers growing through concrete and startling everyone with their colour and vigour. But are they possible? Well, yes and no. Jesus' point was not to provide his followers with a new rule-book, a list of dos and don'ts that you could tick off one by one, and sit back satisfied at the end of a successful moral day. The point was to illustrate an attitude of heart, a lightness of spirit in the face of all that the world can throw at you. And at the centre of it is the thing that motivates and gives colour to the whole: you are to be like this because that's what God is like. God is generous to all people, generous (in the eyes of the stingy) to a fault: he provides good things for all to enjoy, the undeserving as well as the deserving.

And we know that God is astonishingly merciful. I know for myself and I suspect anyone who knows their own heart truly, and still goes on experiencing God's grace and love like I know I do, will agree with this. So the basis of our actions is, as God's forgiven children, how can we be any less merciful than him? Only when people discover that this is the sort of God they are dealing with will they have any chance of making this way of life their own. This is the sort of radical love our God has for us and calls us to have in his name.

I'd like to take a quick closer look at the instructions here. The first set in verses 27-29 presupposes situations of conflict. We may not think we have enemies but we all experience conflict at some time. This is about responding not in recrimination, in blame or self-justification but with attitudes and actions that seek the good of the other. These build up our community whichever setting we are in. This is not just being in tune with the non-violence movement – it goes beyond non-retaliation to taking positive steps to promote the welfare of the party with whom we are in conflict.

Verse 30 presupposes an economic situation of poverty and exploitation and urges us to share from what we have.

Verse 31 is what people have called the 'golden rule' – Do to others as you would have them do to you. But Jesus is not talking here about just the reciprocity that was the usual behavior of society then as it often is today too. As he make clear from his examples this is not just about giving so you get back or treating someone well so that they treat you well in return. Lending your neighbor a cup of sugar or a tool so that they will return the favour. This is about doing to others as if they were living in God's kingdom and treating people as they would treat you if they were living under God's reign. IE replace the reciprocity of the world with the actions of God's Kingdom, imitating the incredible generosity of God which is beyond expectation. There are no boundaries on God's love based on how his love is received. In the same way we are called to will the good of any other and to act on that will, to radically love in our actions even those who would not respond to that love or will us harm.

Do we know God to be like that? Do we truly believe in and know God to be generous to the stingy and the wicked, the undeserving. This list of instructions is all about which God you believe in – and about the way of life that follows as a result. We must admit with shame that large sections of Christianity down the years seem to have known little or nothing of the God Jesus was talking about. Much that has called itself by the name of Jesus seems to have believed instead in a gloomy God, a penny-pinching God, a God whose only concern is to make life difficult, and salvation nearly impossible. Also this passage gives the lie to the old idea (which was around in Jesus' day as well as our own) that all religions are really the same, that all gods are really variations on the same theme. This God is different. If you lived in a society where everyone really believed in this God, there wouldn't be any violence. There wouldn't be any revenge. There wouldn't be any divisions of class or caste. Property and possessions wouldn't be nearly as important as making sure your neighbour was all right. Imagine if even a few people around you took Jesus seriously and lived like that. Life would be exuberant, different, astonishing. People would be amazed and attracted. And of course people were when Jesus did it himself. The reason why crowds gathered, as Luke makes clear

earlier in his gospel, was that power was flowing out of Jesus, and people were being healed. His whole life was one of exuberant generosity, giving all he'd got to give to everyone who needed it. He was speaking of what he knew: the extravagant love of his Father, and the call to live a lavish human life in response.

And finally, when they struck him on the cheek and ripped the coat and shirt off his back, he went on loving and forgiving, as we read later in the gospels. He didn't show love only to his friends, but to his enemies, weeping over the city that had rejected his plea for peace. He was the true embodiment of the God of whom he spoke.

There are two particularly astonishing things about these instructions, these examples of how to live in God's Kingdom. First, their simplicity: they are obvious, clear, direct and memorable. Second, their scarcity. How many people do you know who really live like this? How many communities do you know where these guidelines are rules of life? Isn't this what the church is supposed to be like? What's gone wrong? Has God changed? Or have we forgotten who he really is?

We are called to this radical love, this imitation of the generosity of our God. And he has given us the power to do it, his presence with us. His Spirit is within us to enable us to receive and live his mercy. Let us pray.

Make me a channel of your peace – the prayer of st Francis