

A sermon preached by Bishop Brian Farran at Whitfords Community Church, Epiphany 4 2005
(Based on Matthew 5:1-12)

On holidays my wife and I tend, when the opportunity arises, to trawl through bookshops. We are on the lookout for novels that will interest us and nowadays books for our young grandsons. That is a section when revisited (as we are now doing after thirty years) that reveals the huge development in available titles. The Green Sheep is a book I've bought for Oscar, aged 20 months, to read with his mother - hopefully he will connect the story with my being a bishop! The Green Sheep is a simple children's story about inclusion and its happiness for all.

We've discovered that a significant section of bookshops is given over to the growing world of "How to..." books - how to be happy in seven lessons, how to be successful with a preface by Allan Bond, how to deal with difficult people (surprisingly written by your next door neighbour!), and so the titles go on and on. These "How to..." books capture a significant market, else they would not be taking up the generous space that they do in bookshops. And before we dismiss them, we have to acknowledge that getting some people acquainted with simple ordering processes can be very helpful indeed to the functioning of their lives.

After all, one should never dispute the effectiveness of Twelve Step programmes like AA or Grow - a community group that assists people deal with depression. In fact, nowadays there are other spin-off programmes that attend to various forms of addiction that use the steps of the original AA programme. Clearly, many, many people have become liberated from the effects of their addictions (whatever they might have been) and lived realistically with the due acknowledgement that they have a particular addiction. Such people are courageous, realistic human beings who know that they depend upon an external Power to assist them live responsibly as human beings. These programmes tend to use the term "Power" rather than God for reasons of wider acceptability, I imagine.

However, the principles that these Twelve Step programmes practise so successfully are very similar in nature to a Christian understanding of human development and behaviour. The only difference, I detect, is that most people have heard demands from the Church about standards of behaviour without being provided with simple helpful steps to ensure the practice of those standards.

We know of the Lord's prohibition against anger. Instinctively we recognise the destructiveness of sustained anger in relationships. And we know the warnings in Scripture about anger - "do not let the sun go now on your anger". Such advice is eminently sensible for nurturing anger destroys the sensitivities of the one doing the nursing. And anger can be a lethal form of violence that breaks relationships and sustains personal equivalents of the Cold War.

What I have said so far is a very simple, brief sketch of our society's attention to personal behaviour and its quest for help in being able to live as well as possible in a variety of areas, from personal relationships, sexual practice to management and even spirituality. The "How to..." books phenomena indicate that if there is a seller's market for such advice, then there are real issues seeking address in our society. We are a society searching for how to live well. That is our present context.

What was the context that Matthew addressed in his composition of the Sermon on the Mount? I pose this question because it is clear that Matthew has developed in his gospel this significant body of teaching that is not present in such an evolved, compact form in Mark's gospel. The version of the sermon in Luke is much shorter. If you compare the two sermons (Luke's is known as the Sermon on the Plain), you will detect that Matthew has altered some of the beatitudes, and has others that are not present in Luke. The fact that there are such differences does require our investigation to notice how the teaching is used in the original contexts, and so to be able to extract that emphasis and apply it to our own context now. Let me say something about Matthew's context.

The sermon begins with Jesus seeing the crowds and getting to a high place from which to teach. Here Matthew has taken up the Hebrew Bible tradition of having something good or momentous occur on a mountain. Here also we see Jesus looking and sounding like another Moses. But it is the disciples who gather around Jesus to receive the instruction. The crowds have receded and for the first time the disciples come forward as the focus of Matthew's teaching and story.

The teaching and experiences directed towards the disciples in Matthew constitute thinly veiled instructional material for the Matthean community.¹ Even the most casual reader can see the thrust of the Sermon, especially in this chapter five, is relationships within the community, seen particularly in the section verses 21-48. These antitheses explicate the difference that life in the kingdom of Heaven is about, and that members of the church are to practise.

Last week I mentioned that a concern of Matthew was the mix of people who made up his church. I made reference to the parable of the wheat and the weeds as indicating that within Matthew's church there were those who embodied the virtues of the kingdom of Heaven, and others who did not, and who caused real concern and difficulties within the church. Obviously, there were some who wished to expel those whose behaviour was damaging the community. The advice in the parable is that such judgement belongs to the Last Days, the time of harvest. However, the issue remained that some members of the church were behaving in ways that were discordant with the values of the kingdom of Heaven.

Relationships in the Matthean church are an issue that is addressed in the Sermon on the Mount. And in addressing relationships in that first century church, the Sermon on the Mount addresses relationships in this and every contemporary church. Matthew has obviously focussed on relationships because he frequently uses the term *adelphos* (brother) throughout the Sermon. See 5:22,23,24,47; 7:3,4,5.

The metaphor of family, and *adelphoi* in particular, captures the ideal nature of the relationships and commitment which Matthew sought to engender within his church. We belong to one another through the effects of baptism and through our faithfulness as disciples. We are kin for we are inheritors of the kingdom of Heaven, to quote the baptism service.

Matthew, through his instruction, encouragement, and his particular presentation of Jesus and his message, hoped to foster a family that withstands the competition and conflict with those powers and leaders opposed to his community. Remember that Matthew's community is probably small, composed mostly of former Jews who still have familial connections with other Jewish religious groups who did not recognise Jesus, and over all this complexity, Matthew's community has to relate to the demands of a pagan foreign government with its occupying troops visible at all major community places.

Matthew's community lives in a complex environment as it seeks to be on mission, as it seeks to understand the teaching of Jesus, as it seeks to practise that teaching, and as it relates to serious external critics of its very foundation. That community faces significant stress, just as today's church does too.

In our own church, the Anglican Communion, we are struggling at the moment to deal with moral and behavioural issues that differ culturally within 38 provinces of the Anglican Communion, ranging from North America to Southern Africa. Thus it is imperative as we receive the teaching of Jesus and apply that teaching, that we take heart and learn from Matthew as he instructed his church in its turbulent context.

Matthew begins the Sermon with nine beatitudes, blessings, or in Greek, *makarioi*. In classical Greek (the Greek language that pre-dated the New Testament and gave rise to the common Greek used in those texts), *makarioi* was regularly used in greetings, in sending wishes, or in describing the well-born, educated, or content person. In Homer it describes the inhabitants of Mount Olympus, the gods.

Matthew's use of the term carries this same general sense of completeness, joy, and reward for living in the manner the beatitudes encourage. In a sense the sermon is like today's "How to..." books. The Beatitudes are attempting to express in various ways what constitutes a 'pure heart' for a member of his community. (5:8). Remember that the heart in the Bible is the seat of decision, of the will -so the necessity that your heart be pure so that your decisions and actions are pure too.

¹ The following is based upon J. Andrew Overman's commentary on Matthew, Church and Community in Crisis, Trinity Press International, pp.74 & 75.

Matthew is indicating that if members of his church practise the Beatitudes then they will be complete, have joy and be content. Certainly, the Beatitudes encapsulate the radical dimension of the teaching of Jesus, the surprises that lie within his demands, and the upside-down social world that the kingdom of Heaven establishes. Careful reflection upon the Beatitudes will assist us to become attuned to the kingdom of Heaven, and thus more consonant with Jesus.

Let me focus on just one beatitude to exemplify its depth and effect.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy” (5:7).² The concept of mercy is very important to Matthew. In two important passages he inserts a classic statement from the prophet Hosea (6:6),
I desire mercy, and not sacrifice (9:13; 12:7)

For Matthew, mercy is a broad term, including both compassion (e.g., 9:27; 15:22; 17:15; 20:30-31) and forgiveness (18:33). As in the Hebrew scriptures, mercy is less an attitude than an activity. Thus in Matthew 23:23 mercy, like justice and faith, is presented as something to be done.

Mercy is an imitation of the nature of God, a teaching even in the Hebrew Bible.

The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.(Exodus 34:6, and repeated with minor variations in subsequent passages)

The practice of mercy in our relationships becomes a sign, a signal of something unexpected. The eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth approach to human relationships is very much alive today. But the intrusion of the unexpected signals the presence of a different social order.

Indeed, the kingdom of Heaven is made visible whenever the Beatitudes are practised, and the dimensions of life in Christ are expressed socially. This is our calling to live these now; to practise the anticipated full appearance of the kingdom of Heaven (as Jesus did), and thus to be an alternative to the violence that so saturates and envelops the world.

So, if we used (as Matthew did) Hosea’s teaching and insight into the very nature of God,

I desire mercy and not sacrifice (or our equivalent to sacrifice)
what might we be required to reorder in our lives and fundamental attitudes?

Might it be our judgements of other people so that we empathise with their struggles in life rather than hit upon their mistakes, or might it be how we act in this community so that we infer always first high motives rather than low motives to others, or that we recognise that ‘there but for the grace of God go I’?

I am always chastened when I recall the critique of Christianity by the German philosopher Nietzsche (who so influenced Adolph Hitler),

I would believe in the Saviour if his disciples looked a little more saved.

The Beatitudes are a summary of the way of life in the kingdom of Heaven, and in that sense the Sermon on the Mount functions as a Christian “how to live” book - how to live God’s future now!

² The following is based upon Douglas Hare’s commentary on Matthew in the Interpretation series, p.40.