

Sermon Sexagesima 2014 – Be Ye Therefore Perfect.

Genesis 1 v1 – 2 v3 p3, Psalm 136, Romans 8 vv 18-25 p1135, Matthew 6 vv 5-24 p970

Last week we were puzzling over the Sermon on the Mount. In many ways, it is Jesus' manifesto. The Sermon is what it means to be a Christian. Centuries previously, God had set the Hebrews free from slavery in Egypt. They had been protected from the angel of death by the blood of the lamb. They had been baptised in the Red Sea. And then they had come to Mount Sinai, where God revealed Himself to Moses and through Moses God gave them the Law. At Mount Sinai God speaks to the Israelites and says, *Ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation* (Exodus 19⁶). The Law of Moses, Jesus says, is summarised in the twin commandments to love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself. *God*, St John teaches us, *is love*. (I John 4¹⁶). The people of God, therefore, are people of love. The Law, the Way in which God's people walk, is the Way of love. Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. How we behave depends on what we are. What we are depends on our relationship with God. God says to the Israelites, *And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and ye shall be my people*. (Leviticus 26¹²). In Leviticus 19¹⁸ we are given the reason for the commandment, *Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself*. The reason given is *I am the LORD*. God is love and it is the nature of the people of God to love, to love God, to love one another, to love the world, which God so loved, *that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life* (John 3¹⁶). Or to put it another way, God says to His people in Leviticus 19², *Ye shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy*.

We see in Jesus that what God promised to Israel under the Old Testament is, as God always meant it to be, an open invitation to all people of every nation through faith in Jesus Christ and in what He has accomplished for us on the Cross. We are set free from slavery to sin and the fear of death. The Blood of Christ, the Passover Lamb, redeems us. We are baptised in Christ. In Him, we come into the presence of God. In God's presence, we receive the Law, His perfect law of love. *Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him and he in God. And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love, dwelleth in God, and God in him* (I John 4^{15&16}).

So what of the Sermon on the Mount? It appears to be the new law, or, rather, a restatement of the old law as the Christian manifesto. Jesus tells His disciples and the crowds what it means to be the people of God. Matthew chapters five, six and seven lay out what it means to be a Christian – to walk in the Way, which is Christ. Jesus proclaims the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven. The Sermon on the Mount is the code by which we citizens of heaven live. St Peter reveals that the Christian Church participates in God's promises to His people. He takes up what God says to His people at Sinai and applies it to us who now know God through faith in Jesus Christ, *But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light* (I Peter 2⁹). This is why Peter says to us Christians, *But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; Because it is written, Be ye holy, for I am holy* (I Peter 1^{15&16}). So Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, *Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect*.

Puzzling. As we saw last week, if we lived by the Sermon on the Mount, we would never be angry or lustful. We would always be honest, loyal and faithful. We would never bear grudges. Our commitment to God would be total. We would always put others before ourselves. We would seek to overcome evil with good and bear the cost ourselves. We would never retaliate. We would be generous to the undeserving. We would love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. *Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.* It is all so unreasonable. It isn't fair. What Jesus is asking of us is impossible. So, I asked, what do we do about the Sermon on the Mount? Do we set it aside as an impossible dream? Is it something that could have worked in Palestine 2,000 years ago but unrealistic for us here today? Was the Sermon on the Mount meant for Christians in the early Roman empire when the Church was a minority sect, but impractical once we became a worldwide religion? Is the Sermon on the Mount a description of heaven, or maybe of some earthly utopia which could only happen if enough people prayed and worked for it? My answer was that the principles of the Sermon on the Mount stand for ever. They are absolute moral principles to which God's people are called. However we work them out in practice, they are our aspiration, our inspiration. We aspire to live loving, honest, loyal, faithful, generous, forgiving, self-sacrificial lives in imitation of Christ and in obedience to His commandment *Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.* The Sermon on the Mount is our standard. It is what we aspire to. To fall short is to sin. The remedy for sin is to repent. To repent is not only to be sorry for our failures, but to aspire, by God's grace to live more Christ like lives. That is why our liturgy is so full of pleas for mercy and forgiveness. If we do not see why we need to ask for forgiveness, it is because our standards are too low. *But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; Because it is written, Be ye holy, for I am holy.*

I am going to give you three reasons why this matters: the Nature of God, human nature and what the world needs. God is holy. God is love. We have no place in His Presence if we are not holy. If we are not holy as God is holy, if we are not perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect, there is no place for us in heaven. There is no place for us at His altar. There is no place for us in the fellowship of the Church. There is no place for us to pray. *Be ye holy, for I am holy.* There can be no fellowship between God and sin. Whatever is not of love is sin. Insofar as we do not love, there is no place for us in the presence of God. *The wages of sin is death* (Romans 6²³). Take that seriously. There is no communion with God, no fellowship of the Holy Spirit, no eternal life for sinners. That is how serious sin is. Jesus has dealt with sin. Jesus has taken on Himself the sins of the whole world *to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption; who made there (by his one oblation of himself once offered) a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world.* That is how serious sin is. In Christ our sins are washed away. Made one with Him in Baptism, we are restored to fellowship with God, we are admitted into the divine presence. He has opened the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers. In Christ, our prayers are heard. We enjoy the fellowship of the Church. In Christ, we may approach the altar. He has prepared for us a home in heaven. *The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord* (Romans 6²³). Remember the Easter Anthems. *Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more: death hath no more dominion over him. For in that he died, he died unto sin once: but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God. Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin: but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our*

Lord. (Romans 6⁹⁻¹¹). It is of the nature of God to be love. God's people cannot be anything less than love. The fact that forgiveness is free is not an excuse for complacency. Christ's love is priceless, not valueless. Freely forgiven for our failures, we cannot aspire to less than the holiness of God.

God's Nature, human nature. The fact is that human beings are made in the image of God. Human beings are the children of God. If we do not know God, there is something lacking in our lives, something lacking which is of infinitely greater significance than the things that we do have. This is why Saint Augustine writes, "*You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless, until they can find rest in you.*" Without God, human beings are incomplete. We are made in the image of love and, insofar as we do not love, our lives are unfulfilled. Insofar as we are not love, our lives are unfilled. If we do not even aspire to live by the principles which Jesus enunciates in the sermon on the Mount, we cannot fulfil our human destiny. Our lives are incomplete, incomplete in the most important particulars. Actually to live loving, honest, loyal, faithful, generous, forgiving, self-sacrificial lives is the only way to live. Sin, the world and the devil will tell you otherwise. They will tell you that it is impossible to live loving, honest, loyal, faithful, generous, forgiving, self-sacrificial lives. Perhaps it is impossible humanly speaking, but there is forgiveness; there is grace. All things are possible with God. *The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

The Nature of God, human nature and what the world needs. *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.* There is so much need in the world, so much to do, that nothing less than total commitment is sufficient for the people of God. If we are one with God's holiness, God's love, God's passion for justice and mercy; for peace, healing and reconciliation in this wicked world; to feed the hungry, to heal the sick, to house the homeless, to clothe the naked; to let light shine in the darkness of ignorance and unbelief; to set the captives free; nothing else will suffice but total commitment to the principles laid down in the Sermon on the Mount. If we lived by the Sermon on the Mount, we would never be angry or lustful. We would always be honest, loyal and faithful. We would never bear grudges. Our commitment to God would be total. We would always put others before ourselves. We would seek to overcome evil with good and bear the cost ourselves. We would never retaliate. We would be generous to the undeserving. We would love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Nothing less will do for the Kingdom of God. Nothing less will bring in that day when, as Revelation promises, *the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ* (11¹⁶). Perhaps it is impossible humanly speaking, but there is forgiveness; there is grace. All things are possible with God.

The Sermon on the Mount, then, is not something we can set aside or ignore. It is not something to admire from a distance, an impossible dream, a vision of what could never be, much as we would like it to be. No, the Sermon on the Mount is what we aspire to. It sets out the principles by which we are called to live. The Sermon on the Mount reflects the very Nature of God. The Sermon on the Mount defines our true human nature for us. As He epitomises the Sermon on the Mount, as He fulfils the Law and the prophets, *Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature* (Colossians 1¹⁵). He is what we

ought to be, what we can aspire to be and what we become in Him. The Sermon on the Mount is Christ's manifesto for the Kingdom of God.

It all depends on our glorious God and His Son Jesus Christ, on His forgiveness of our shortcomings and His grace that we may do His Will. Let's turn to page 806 in our prayer books and stand and say together that great hymn of praise and utter dependence on God *Te Deum Laudamus, We Praise Thee O God.*

WE praise thee, O God : we acknowledge thee to be the Lord.
 All the earth doth worship thee : the Father everlasting.
 To thee all Angels cry aloud : the Heavens, and all the Powers therein.
 To thee Cherubin and Seraphin : continually do cry,
 Holy, Holy, Holy : Lord God of Sabaoth;
 Heaven and earth are full of the Majesty : of thy glory.
 The glorious company of the Apostles : praise thee.
 The goodly fellowship of the Prophets : praise thee.
 The noble army of Martyrs : praise thee.
 The holy Church throughout all the world : doth acknowledge thee;
 The Father : of an infinite Majesty;
 Thine honourable, true : and only Son;
 Also the Holy Ghost : the Comforter.
 Thou art the King of Glory : O Christ.
 Thou art the everlasting Son : of the Father.
 When thou tookest upon thee to deliver man : thou didst not abhor the Virgin's womb.
 When thou hadst overcome the sharpness of death : thou didst open the Kingdom of Heaven
 to all believers.
 Thou sittest at the right hand of God : in the glory of the Father.
 We believe that thou shalt come : to be our Judge.
 We therefore pray thee, help thy servants : whom thou hast redeemed with thy precious
 blood.
 Make them to be numbered with thy Saints : in glory everlasting.
 O Lord, save thy people : and bless thine heritage.
 Govern them : and lift them up for ever.
 Day by day : we magnify thee;
 And we worship thy Name : ever world without end.
 Vouchsafe, O Lord : to keep us this day without sin.
 O Lord, have mercy upon us : have mercy upon us.
 O Lord, let thy mercy lighten upon us : as our trust is in thee.
 O Lord, in thee have I trusted : let me never be confounded.