

Loving your enemies

[TEXT OF SERMON PREACHED AT ST. MATTHEW'S CHURCH, ST. ALBERT ON 25 FEBRUARY, 1990, BY MARTIN HATTERSLEY, ASSISTANT PRIEST, ST. MATTHEW'S ANGLICAN CHURCH, ST. ALBERT, ALBERTA.]

[This sermon was preached at St. Matthew's Church, St. Albert, at the same time as the trial of Ronald Nienhaus on a charge of murder was taking place]

Matthew 5.43

As you may have gathered from the TV over these past two weeks, this has been an interesting and only too stressful time in the life of the Hattersley family, as the trial of the man responsible for the death of our daughter has moved through its various stages to a final verdict of manslaughter. I would like to thank so many of you for your support of myself and my family in prayer while this has been going on. It has made a real difference to the way in which all this has affected us.

It is by a strange coincidence, then - one of those coincidences that is a little too strange for me to brush it off completely as a coincidence - that I am called to preach on a day when the Gospel is this famous and demanding passage from Christ's Sermon on the Mount:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."

Having a passage like this before us brings us to a crucial question. Is our religion just a convenient way of making friends and passing a Sunday morning in a way that makes us feel good? Or is Christianity for us a challenging and a desperately serious way of life: a way in which, by our own sacrifice, suffering and loss, we bring reconciliation and healing to the world?

Shortly after I joined you at the beginning of this year, I preached on the occasion of Our Lord's baptism. I suggested that Christ's actions at that point were introducing something entirely new to the whole picture of religion. People, you will recall, were coming to John the Baptist, confessing their sins, and being plunged in the river Jordan in the rite of Baptism to symbolize the death they deserved, and the new life they intended to lead. When Jesus asked for Baptism, John at first refused. John was unworthy to untie Jesus' shoelaces - how can this perfect man confess his sins and behave and be treated as one more repentant member of sinful humanity?

Nevertheless, Jesus insisted, and was baptized. By so doing, he unleashed on the world a whole new way to man's reconciliation with God. The just man pays the price, in shame and suffering, for the sins of the unjust. In this way, the path is opened for the sins of all the world to be forgiven. Christ, rich in goodness, has given these riches to us - so that we, through his poverty, can undeservedly become rich.

Not only, however, is this the unveiling of a new path of forgiveness. It is a revealing of the character of God the Father himself. In Creation, God has given of Himself, to make a Universe and a world where men have power to act independently of him, even to defy him. God, who is rich, has become poor so that the universe, and mankind in particular, through his poverty can become rich. We have found the key to the nature of the Father. It is this kind of Love.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ is pursuing this theme. He is passing on to his disciples the secret

of this new kind of life - going two miles when we are only compelled to go one, turning the other cheek, forgiving our enemies, praying for the good of those who do us harm. It is a life of going beyond the demands of mere justice, so that our sacrifices can repay the cost of the evil others do in the world.

Jesus is calling us to be "perfect" - finished products, as it were. A rose is always perfect throughout its life, as it passes from bud, to flower, then to be cut, to be appreciated, and finally to wilt, and to die. But the joy we get from looking at a rose bud is not in the bud itself, but in the flower it is going to be: that will be its "perfection". In the same way, the history of the Bible is of the development of man's concept of God, and so of his behaviour in the light of what he believes the will of God to be, towards the perfect character - the "mind of Christ".

Jacob, founder of the Jewish people, when he saw his vision of a ladder stretching into heaven, did a deal with God which in effect told God that if God would help him in all his worries and the needs of his life, Jacob would take God for his God. Because of a famine, Jacob settled in Egypt. That following of a God of economic success ended in the oppression of the Jewish people in Egypt. In the end, they broke free, leaving the Egyptians having lost their gold and silver, their firstborn of man and beast, and their army in the Red Sea. If we compare the situation to that in Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan, they left the Egyptians in a state like that of the victim left at the roadside by robbers.

The next stage was that of the Law. Through Moses, God told men of a number of "thou shalt nots", just as we tell our children. We may be poor, the other man may be rich, but we leave his property alone. Like the priest in the Good Samaritan story, we pass by on the other side.

The next stage is that of the Kingdom. The civilization brought about by Law brings prosperity, but then the Law is used to keep the rich rich, and the poor, in poverty. It is the condition of oppression that the late Kings of Israel thought acceptable, and the prophets thought intolerable, in the time before Israel was taken into captivity. Like the Levite, this view of the law allows us to neglect the unfortunate, and pass by on the other side.

The Good Samaritan, however, is the one who in his compassion, digs into his own pocket to pay for medical care for the victim. *"Though he is rich, he becomes poor, so that others through his poverty may become rich."* In his conduct, his is an image of Christ himself. He is a true *"child of his Father who is in heaven."* His love is unconditional - his help comes on the basis of need, not of merit.

The growing vision of God that we see, therefore, is rather like the ripening understanding a child develops of his father. First of all, a God who provides for us. Then, a God who controls us and punishes us if need be. Then a God who empowers us. Finally, though, a God who demands from us the same sacrifices for others that he has previously made for us. In that way we become truly His children. He is a God of unconditional love. His compassion is over all that he has made. He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He will leave ninety-nine sheep behind in order to go looking for the hundredth sheep that is lost. He expects us to join in the search party.

Christ's approach is an enormous challenge to us, and some Christians, it seems to me, never follow this process of growth to its end. Instead, in the name of "Christianity", we are given a mish-mash of Old Testament legalisms that essentially are a way of avoiding the real issue, the painful issue, of the call to us to sacrifice so as to pay the price of another's sin. When we come to the confession section in our service, it is so easy to say *"Lord, I thank thee I am not as other men are"*, as the Pharisee did. May I recommend that if you ever think this way, you think more corporately. Confess the sins not just of yourself, but of your family. Of this parish of St. Matthew - where it has fallen short in growth and service. Of the Anglican Church of Canada. Of the whole Anglican communion. Of the whole Christian church throughout the world. Of the whole human race, of which we are members, and our incredible inhumanity to each other. There will be plenty to talk about then - and plenty to be forgiven!

Sin will no longer be a matter of "us" and "them", of good guys outside prison and bad guys on the inside. It will become the collective problem, the collective responsibility of the whole human race - and we are part of that human race, and we are called on to provide that solution.

Our ministry of reconciliation will not just be to nice people who go to our church. It will be to the whole human race, the whole world: not just to the "good", but to the world's criminals and outcasts as well. It is a call to sacrifice our lives, to be an instrument of healing to people that on one level we may hate and much rather would have nothing to do with at all.

Over the past eighteen months the conviction has grown on me that this is what God is like, and this is what God is wants of his people. Frankly, there are times when I hate it. There is a part of me that just wishes that God would not be so reckless with his love, not so demanding that we should love in the same way also. I would like to run away from God's presence: I would almost encourage you to run away too - but, as Peter said *"Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."*

Jesus faced this feeling also, in the garden of Gethsemane, before his Cross. In the end he said *"Thy will be done."*

Lent is coming - the season when we examine our spiritual lives. I hope that this passage will give us all something to think about, as that time approaches.

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