

MATTHEW 5:21-37
ST JAMES', 12.2.17, 11.00 am

INTRODUCTION

Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven (v 20). So Jesus warns us in the verse immediately before this morning's Gospel passage begins.

Through the rest of this chapter, Jesus goes on to give six examples which help to show what he means, to show his followers ways in which he expects them to put his teaching into practice. Today, we've heard four of those examples. We can see from them that Jesus is very demanding! In all that he says, Jesus reminds us of a principle which the scribes and Pharisees seem to have forgotten, a principle which we're constantly tempted to forget: *[People] look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart* (1 Samuel 16:7).

I think we also forget just how shocked the people gathered around Jesus must have been when they heard him speak. Calmly, and quietly, Jesus says, time and again, *You have heard that it was said . . . But I tell you that . . .* Jesus isn't just contributing to an ongoing debate about how to interpret the laws of Moses: he's making a definitive declaration that this is God's will. It's not surprising that Matthew tells us, *the crowds were amazed at [Jesus'] teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law* (7:28-29).

I haven't got time this morning to look at all that Jesus says here. So I'm going to focus on the first paragraph, headed 'Murder' in the church Bibles. If we, who are Jesus' disciples today, took this teaching to heart, we really would be letting our light shine before people, like a city on a hill.

JESUS' TEACHING ON MURDER

Back in 2001, Liverpool Cathedral hosted a series of talks on the Ten Commandments, given by J John. A number of people I knew went along to hear him, and came back each week saying how powerfully he spoke, and how uncomfortable he made them feel. When the time came for the talk on 'You shall not murder', one of my friends said that she'd gone along thinking, 'Well, I'm OK on this one: I know I haven't broken this commandment'. But she came away realising that in God's eyes, she was guilty, even of murder.

I'd be very surprised if at least some of us, during this last week, haven't been angry with family members, neighbours or friends. We've probably expressed our anger by calling them names, insulting them, possibly even to their face.

There's nothing wrong *per se* with being angry about something. The person who's never angry is the person who doesn't care. Jesus himself was angry with the scribes and Pharisees: in chapter 23, he repeatedly calls them *hypocrites*, and for good measure, he calls them *blind guides*, *blind fools*, and *snakes* as well (Matthew 23:13-36)! Jesus is angry with them because the effect of their teaching and example is to prevent ordinary people from drawing close to God, from

experiencing God's love and forgiveness. The scribes' and Pharisees' attempts to do what God requires don't result in God's name being glorified; in fact the opposite. Anger is an appropriate response to spiritual one-upmanship, and to oppression, exploitation, injustice, and so on. Jesus doesn't call people names thoughtlessly, or out of personal bitterness, though: the people he castigates in chapter 23 were exactly the things he said they were.

But more often than not, our anger isn't about the bigger issues in life, it's about people who've hurt us. We hurl insults around, not because we really think people are *fools* or good-for-nothing, but to lash out and hurt them back. Or maybe we've been on the receiving end.

Tom Wright outlines a scenario as follows:

The executive whose boss has shouted at him goes back to his own office and shouts at the secretary. The secretary goes home and shouts at the children. The children shout at the cat.¹

We may laugh. But the problem is that things can escalate very quickly, or they can rumble on for years. The results include estranged families, communities divided by so-called 'peace walls', nations embroiled in bloody civil wars . . . the list goes on. Jesus equates anger with murder because the one leads to the other. The root cause of murder is the anger, hatred and contempt we're tempted to harbour in our hearts towards anyone who happens to cross or upset us.

Jesus won't countenance anger, hatred and contempt amongst his followers: *anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to*

judgment . . . anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca' is answerable to the Sanhedrin . . . anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell (v 22). We may never physically commit murder, but we should never even allow ourselves to get near the thought that we wish someone were dead.² Every time we hold a grudge, every time we lash out at someone who's hurt us, every time we refuse to accept an apology, we're putting ourselves under God's judgment.

The question is, what should we do? Think about how you react when someone hurts you. Maybe you've had a row with someone who refuses to see your point of view. Maybe someone's accused you of bullying, when all you've done is asked them a question. Maybe someone simply hasn't lived up to your expectations of them . . . think about what the Lord would have to say about your reaction. Jesus tells us that what God requires of us in these situations is very simple: be reconciled; make friends. It doesn't matter whether or not you consider yourself to be in the right. Make peace; settle the dispute; don't let the situation rumble on, or escalate into something worse.

If we're harbouring anger, hatred or contempt in our hearts towards anyone, then we may as well not bother coming to church. Our worship isn't acceptable to God if we refuse to make peace. Jesus exaggerates to make his point. In vv 23-24, he imagines someone arriving in the Temple in Jerusalem to offer an animal sacrifice. As they approach their holy and loving God, they remember that they've never sorted out the row they had a few weeks back with someone from their synagogue back home in Galilee. Jesus says that the right thing to do

is to leave the animal in the Temple, go back home (which takes about three days) and make things up with their neighbour, and only then come back to the Temple (another three days' journey) and offer their sacrifice!

Allowing our bad relationships to fester could have dire consequences, Jesus warns. Time to put things right could well be running out. Jesus urges us to *settle matters quickly with [our] adversary* (v 25), or we may find that its too late, and that we have to face God's judgment with anger, hatred and contempt still in our hearts.

CONCLUSION

[People] look at the outward appearance, but [the Lord] looks at the heart. Do you think the Lord is pleased with what's in your heart? If the answer to that question is 'no', the good news is that he's longing to help you change, and that with him, even that is possible. If you have damaged relationships – with people in your family, with people at church, with neighbours down your street, with friends – then resolve to do everything you can do to put them right. It won't be easy. You may have to admit that you were in the wrong. Ask the Lord to help you. And be encouraged that with Jesus it is possible!

And if someone comes to you, to seek reconciliation – don't turn them away! You may or may not feel that there's a problem; they clearly do, and if they're taking the Lord's teaching seriously enough to set things

straight, then the least you can do is make that as easy as possible for them.

Its much easier to hold onto our anger, to nurse our grudges, to take revenge on people who've hurt us. But that's not an option for followers of Jesus. We are the light of the world (v 14). In chapter 6, Jesus says, *if then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness* (6:23). Praise the Lord that with his help, we can be reconciled, we can make friends, even with those who've hurt us most.

¹ Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone Part 1*, second edition (London, SPCK, 2004), p 43

² *ibid*