

The Traditional Anglican Church: Saint Luke's Ampt Hill
A brief course of three expositions of the Sermon on the Mount

Matthew Chapter 5

"he opened his mouth and taught them" (Matthew 5.2).

The three Sundays we meet in Lent are an opportunity to recall some basics of the Christian life, and I realise that I have not tried to expound the "Sermon on the Mount" to you before in any connected manner.

Now we know, not least from the "Feeding of the Five Thousand", that the Lord did preach at length. What the disciples remembered, and so what the Gospels preserve, tends to be short sayings. Consequently some theologians assume that a reasonably long ordered discourse like these three chapters of St. Matthew must be artificial. Maybe, but they are still in the Lord's own words and the ordering is that of a first century Christian, far nearer both in background and in thinking to the Lord than we can ever be. So we do well to respect the Sermon as a totality, not just as a jumble of separate sayings.

The Sermon is delivered in the presence of the "multitude" - which must mean ordinary Jews of every degree of observance - and even if it is mainly aimed at the disciples, they also are Jews. So the Lord can assume some common ground with his hearers. They all believe in God. They all accept that God's Teaching (what we not wholly accurately call the "Law") is of obligation. But that is only the beginning of the matter - they want to know how to order their lives in practice. That is why they listen. If we too are to listen, we must appreciate that our needs are not quite the same.

The Sermon begins (5.3-10) not with commandments but with promises. In making promises, the Lord is exercising God's authority on earth - this is (at the least) the behaviour of a prophet. The "Beatitudes" say, in short, this is how the Father will variously bless those who live out the various kinds of life which He wants. God will give you opportunities (and different ones to different people) and will reward those who respond. Sometimes the task is very practical (the merciful, the peacemakers); sometimes it is more of an approach to life (poor in spirit, meek) - but practical behaviour and its reward (which is spiritual but might also be tangible) is never far away.

The Lord accepts (5.11-16) that not all Jews (let alone the rest of us) will respond; the call is to be the "light of the world" - the whole hearted among an apathetic or even hostile majority. This does then address our situation, much better perhaps than when a feeble remnant of Christianity was widespread. We will be different; we will be noticed.

Earlier I suggested the behaviour of a prophet - but more so, for we will hear not "Thus saith *the Lord*" but rather "I say unto you". God's Teaching (by Moses and the prophets) remains, but the Lord will fulfil it, will perfect and complete it, and this may be disruptive. (5.17-20)

This is worked out in terms of major parts of that Teaching (5.21-47). "Thou shalt not kill" - but much more (reconciliation) is required. "Thou shalt not commit adultery" - but much more is required in the way of continence (and the explicit provision for divorce in the Law is rejected). "Thou shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths" - but more, your every word must be dependable. "An eye for an eye" - which is itself a restriction on retaliation - becomes "resist not evil" and indeed "love your enemies" - after all, that is how our Father in Heaven behaves and we are called to be his "sons". Which rationally leads to the summary: "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5.48).

This is not an easy vocation. "Yet we must not despair. We have Christ's Spirit working within us to make us like Christ: and if only we have the right ideal in front of us and are moving however slowly towards it, . . . we shall be perfected at last." (Bishop Gore on this passage.)

Matthew Chapter 6

"seek ye first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Matthew 6.33).

The Sermon on the Mount was first delivered to ordinary Jews, so both the Lord and his hearers accept that they will pray, and fast, and give alms - for a Jew can do these anywhere, however far from temple or synagogue.

The issue is not then whether to do so, or what the external acts will be (for these are unavoidable), but motive. The Father commands these acts of righteousness and will reward them, but that reward can be lost if they are done "before men", that is to gain respect. Don't worry to the extent that people can't help knowing about our discharge of these duties - but don't go out of your way to be noticed if that might make other people think well of you (perhaps less of a problem for us in a post-Christian society than for the Lord amongst his people).

Much of this chapter, and not least the "Lord's Prayer", turns upon our confident trust in the Father. We are not trying to extract favours from God but accepting his plan, his generosity. This is not easy, and that is why the Lord gave us a form of prayer, not just for repetition (though within two generations of the Resurrection Christians were already reciting it three times a day) but so that we should learn acceptance by the repetition.

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It is hard for us to accept the Father's generosity. I know the temptation to "lay up treasure", as I have just added to my savings. I can argue that this makes it more likely that I can continue my ministry when I can no longer finance it from work; I can argue that I must protect my wife if not myself; I can estimate what I spend in alms and on the priesthood; I can point out that the Lord and his disciples depended on the support of the rich - but all of this is wriggling. I expect we all share this experience, more or less.

On the other hand, we are not *all* called to abandon everything (though *some* individuals may be so called), but we are all called not to "be anxious" ("take no thought" is a mistranslation). St. Paul was savage about Christians who thought they need not work: "let them not eat" was his answer. For those of us still of working age, the point is to work honestly but not to make a great fuss about it. I wonder whether Christians ought to get to the top of their professions! The Father's generosity will give us enough.

The Lord was not telling all his hearers to give up managing their lives, but not to be anxious, for the Father knows our needs. That is why our prayers are to be so limited - give us this day the bread we need today, that and no more. Give us what is needed - on your terms and not the world's - and the grace to be relaxed and thankful. There is no promise of prosperity, that is a false gospel. There is a promise of enough.

Let there be no nonsense, however. Christianity does not shirk the idea of reward, though some think this an unworthy bribe. God is just as well as generous. If we act for God, we will come to love him, and even though we are "unprofitable servants", we will not lose our reward. "To lay up treasure in heaven is to do acts which promote, or belong to, the kingdom of God; and what our Lord assures us of is that any act of our hands, any thought of our heart, any word of our lips, which promotes the divine kingdom by the ordering whether of our own life or of the world outside, is stored up in the divine treasure-house, and when the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, shall at last appear, that honest effort of ours, which seemed so ineffectual, shall be found to be a brick built into the wall of that eternal and celestial fabric." (Bishop Gore on this passage.)

Matthew Chapter 7

"enter ye in by the narrow gate" (Matthew 7.13).

The Sermon on the Mount was first delivered to ordinary Jews, and so to those tempted to see religion as "law" and to evaluate others in terms of that law. But, for most of us most of the time, that is not necessary. It is a burden for the clergy, sometimes, to decide whether somebody, however apparently sinful, is trying to be faithful. It may even be necessary to exclude somebody from the Church because they are not trying to be faithful. But generally, we should not fascinate ourselves with such questions. When they are unavoidable, our business is saving, not judging. We will never make any spiritual progress by judging others - if we try, God may judge us ("that ye may not be judged" implies that warning).

That is why I preach so little about the sins of the Anglican Communion.

We have already learnt that a basic requirement of the faith is appreciation of God's generosity towards us. The Lord comes back to that topic. If even "ye, being evil" (this is as much preacher's humour as a factual statement) as a matter of course are generous to your children, then obviously the Father, being good, will be generous to all of us his children, good or bad. And if so, we must follow him.

It will not be easy. We are offered a cramped gate, a narrow path; a route thereafter along which there are many "false prophets" to seduce us. They will be plausible; we do have to reject their teaching (which is not the same thing as "judging", or delighting in condemning them) on the basis that their "fruits" are not those of the Sermon on the Mount.

This life is a time of testing. We are not to judge, but, no mistake, the Father will and indeed at all times does. There are only two ways - and "he that is not with me is against me". We can build our lives upon that "Rock which was Christ" (I Cor. 10.4); if not, whatever we think we are doing, we will be found to have built on the shifting sands of human folly. The Lord, exercising the authority of the Father, declares the Father's terms. "The multitude were astonished at his teaching" - we must not let the familiarity of the words hide from us how astonishing it is.

This sounds grim; but the Lord refuses to calculate the odds. He would not say if there were few to be saved - only this, that those who have heard must make their choice and live it out. But this is "good news" - hard it may be, but there is a way to God open. The teaching of the two ways can easily lead to despair (that in practice only the way to destruction is open), but that is not the Lord's message.

"The test of all spiritual fabrics is their capacity to stand the strain of wild and rough experiences" (Bishop Gore again). We do not live in an "age of faith" in which we are protected by the assumptions we share with many around us. "We know" (and how much more we than even Bishop Gore could imagine!) "that temptation is both thorough and searching, and that our moral and religious principles will in different ways be tested to the uttermost. To stand the test and to carry our moral being through it all to victory - that is the one thing that matters; and make this possible there is one sovereign expedient - that is thorough and whole-hearted conversion of our will, our intellect, our affection, to Christ and His word."

The quotations from Bishop Gore are from his 1987 commentary on the Sermon on the Mount.