

Epiphany 7 – Wesley Parish Service – 23rd February 2014

Theme: “Foundational teaching for life”

Readings: Matthew 5:38-48, 1 Corinthians 3:10-11

Text: “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.” 1 Cor 3:11

Introduction

Many years ago, while studying social work, with a little psychology thrown in, I remember the debates about: ‘Are we born with our personality or is it the environment/family/faith that moulds us to the way we are?’ It always threw up discussion about socialization, culture, faith, parenting styles, choices, innate aspects of choosing right from wrong, financial and social backgrounds and so forth.

Here in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus continues to give us teaching to guide us in our faith concepts that leads Paul to remind the infant church in Corinth that our faith, our living values, need to be laid upon firm foundations given to us in and through Christ Jesus. I have no doubt that some personality comes out of the womb with us but alongside of that is the tempering of personality, the socializing with others and the concepts of decision making of which part is discerning right from wrong and how we treat others.

Middle

Jesus’ strong teaching for us continues in today’s Gospel from Matthew 5: 38-48.

There are two neat sections:-

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| 38-42 | which gives further teaching on an ‘eye for an eye’ |
| 43-48 | which furthers ‘loving your enemies’ |

Jesus is using the rabbinic style found earlier in the passage and typical of the teachers of the day: ‘You have heard that it was said ... But I tell you or say unto you...’

Some of what Jesus says needs to be understood in the context of his day for us to make sense of his teaching and not to take it out of context, which we so easily can without background knowledge.

The law ‘an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth’ was intended to establish proportionate justice rather than private revenge as the standard for community life. This has been forgotten and many still live by this philosophy that breeds hatred of one generation to the next. By Jesus’ time, many rabbis had recommended that injuries should be compensated financially rather than physically. This probably would have been the case in Jesus’ time. We tend to forget this as has much of history.

The second thing in this first stanza relates to not ‘resisting an evil doer’. This may well have military connotations for that time. ‘Resist’ is usually a word pertaining to armed struggles against an oppressor. For Jesus’ time, this was the Roman rulers, and there were those, even in Jesus’ disciples ranks, with overt revolutionary plans to violently overthrow the Romans. Jesus here is teaching non-violent resistance.

There follows three examples of non-violent resistance.

1. The first is to turn the other cheek when violated
2. The second is that when you are sued, give not only your outer cloak, but also your inner tunic which is more than you legally have to
3. Thirdly, civilians could be conscripted by the military to carry their gear a mile, although this legal limit was often ignored. To go willingly to a second mile would be to submit voluntarily to a Roman’s failure to comply with their own regulations and demean them by your own generous and gracious actions.

The final act here seems initially incongruous with the other things. However, it is about generosity – giving to others in need. Jesus invokes a generous heart, a generous spirit and generous actions.

For many, Jesus' teaching here would have seemed unthinkable – almost traitorous. Certainly this would have been one of the things Judas Iscariot would have had in the back of his mind as he betrayed Jesus.

The next section of teaching would not have helped Judas or some of the revolutionaries then or now to ultimately follow Jesus.

“But I tell you: Love your neighbours and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons(and daughters) of your Father in heaven.” Vss 44/45a

Jesus' teaching that his disciples should: “be perfect ... as your heavenly Father is perfect” (vs 48) echoes the call of God to Israel. The law in Leviticus is often punctuated with the phrase, “You shall be holy, for the Lord your God is holy”. To be a son or daughter of a person is to exhibit the qualities of that person. Thus the character of the people of God should reflect the character of God. That is what Jesus is calling his disciples to be, and hence us as disciples.

Again strong, ethical teaching by Jesus to his disciples and to the people in this section of the Sermon on the Mount.

Reflection for ourselves today

1. The legalism of the Law is not what Jesus is about. It is rather our relationships with others. The way we treat those who are nice to us and those who are horrible to us. Both are to be given grace, love, tolerance and patience. We don't have to agree with them but we do need to pray for all. Not always easy
2. There is a strong call to non-violence in the way we deal with conflict situations. The conventional understanding of ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’ has led to atrocities beyond belief which are still occurring. We only need to listen to the news or read a paper – Syria, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, various African nations and so the list goes on. Even here in different sections of society we see and read of ‘pay back reprisals’ and we wonder why, how and what can we do?
3. We are reminded in 1 Corinthians 3: 10-11 that foundational to our faith is ‘that already laid, which is Jesus Christ’. Paul is saying that there is one Lord, one foundation stone, one whose teachings need to be followed and we need to remember that today and make sure our children and our children's children have that spiritual, ethical and liberating foundation for life. That is part of our role which we re-affirm each time we have a baptism, that we will offer a place where children, youth and adults can learn the ways of Christ. This is part of our community and integral to our church family.

Let me conclude with a poem from Bruce Prewer on the Matthew passage: I see a man without a coat go walking by.

I stop him in the icy wind and ask him why?
He smiles and says: ‘To go without is quite okay, there comes a
third degree of warmth that comes to stay.’
Those bruises on both of your cheeks, who struck you there?
And why although they are so raw you do not care?
He gently touched his right cheek and said:
“that's rough, but till you give the left as well it's not enough.”
“The sun shines freely on both good and bad, the gentle rain from
Heaven falls on wise and mad”.
“Learn from your God the secret life where love comes free,
Follow your God with generous love and happy be.”
“The God who counts your every hair is perfect grace, such love
is now your ground and goal so up the pace.”
I thought of all my stingy ways and hung my head:
He knelt, looked up into my eyes and all my shame fled.