

Sermon on Matthew 5: 38-48

Perfect Imperfection

So after a couple of weeks reflecting on 1 Corinthians today we move back to the Gospel and what has come to be known as the Sermon on the Mount.

Of all the teaching of the NT, perhaps more than any other section, the SOTM has come to typify what Christian belief and practice are all about.

It is God's blueprint for the world turned right ways up.

How things *ought* to be, rather than how things are – blessed are the poor, the meek, the persecuted, those who seek after righteousness.

It's a manifesto for the Kingdom of God to be brought to bear in this world even as it points towards the world to come.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer for whom the SOTM was crucial to his sense of the Gospel wrote that the whole of its message could be summed up in the word love that we meet for the first time in the passage we've heard today from Matthew 5.

The Love of God grounded in the complexities, struggles, and tensions of our world.

Grounded in our lives and set to work in our relationships, even with our enemies – love your enemies Jesus says.

This is no wishy washy call to a 'nice' or what our world might call a 'good life'.

This is the heart of God writ large on our hearts.

And as we see in Jesus life, this is a road marked by suffering as much as anything.

Of all the astonishing verses in the SOTM, though, Matthew 5:48 would have to come close to the top of the list.

“Be perfect”, Jesus says, “as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

I wonder if you've ever been accused of being a perfectionist?

It's often taken or heard as a criticism, but here you now have a biblical mandate of sorts.

Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect.

This is the summation verse which puts us right at the heart of the hardest ethical teachings of the Christian faith.

And so as if to really drive home how close to the heart of God these commands are, Jesus finishes the section by saying, be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.

Nothing too demanding then?

Nor daunting?

Down the centuries Christians have sat with this verse like a mathematician with an unsolvable equation.

Trying to work it out.

Wrestling and struggling.

Be perfect.

Be like God.

And its meaning has regularly eluded us.

Either that or it has felt so intimidating, we've preferred, as some interpreters have, to brush it off as an impossibility.

As is so often the case though, much depends on our reading.

The point of the Gospel is never to so burden us with a weight of expectation so heavy that we become paralysed.

Indeed in Matthew 11 Jesus will say, 'Come to me all you who are heavy laden and I will give you rest. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'

No, following Jesus is supposed to be a freeing and empowering invitation.

And if faith feels so burdensome to make us worry and fret all the time as to whether we're failing, we're missing the point.

I was driving the other day and before I knew it I was passing one of those mobile speed cameras.

And on the sudden shaft of guilt that shot through my body as I dropped my eyes immediately to see how fast I was travelling.

Fortunately, on this occasion I was okay, well under the limit.

This is the way law is supposed to work.

It's supposed to remind us of the boundaries of acceptable behaviour and discipline us if and when we overstep them.

Righteousness, it then follows, has to do with keeping within the limits, not breaking the law, holding to the code.

Yet Jesus' teaching is taking us beyond such an understanding.

The Torah, the Jewish law, was intended to create a way of life for the people, but it was still a law based system, centring in the ten commandments.

It was imagining what a Godward life and community looked like, but still expressing it mainly in do's and don'ts.

It was given of God, but containing within it the promise of more, of a greater fulfilment.

Earlier on this is what Jesus says he has come to do – I have not come to abolish the law and the prophets, he says, but to fulfil them.

Jesus fulfils the law in two ways, the law is clearly kept in Jesus' life – he does not murder, or steal, or envy etc, yet more importantly it is in his life that that which the law anticipates comes fully to fruition – a divine life of complete love, justice, and mercy in the light and way of God.

And as we see, this means going way beyond a sense of keeping within the limits.

You have heard it said an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, but I say to you do not resist an evil person.

If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.

You have heard it said love your neighbour and hate your enemy.

But I tell you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

We recall Jesus' own prayer on the cross for his persecutors – Father forgive them for they know not what they do.

This is what righteousness looks like.

A life of love at all costs, forgiveness at all costs, grace at all costs, because it reflects the heart of God.

So if Jesus reflects the heart of God, and faith in Jesus means being as he is, we get a very different sense of the call to be perfect.

This is a different kind of perfectionism to what we're used to.

The word itself comes from the Greek word *telos* which means something more like 'complete', or 'to its proper end'.

The *telos* of a house is to provide shelter and keep the rain off.

So the *telos* of a human life, made in the image of God, is to live into that image as fully and completely as possible.

As we take on the mantle of discipleship we grow more and more into Jesus and his way: this is our *telos*, our purpose, our true end.

We can be perfectionists, without being perfect, because none of us is.

But this should be a profoundly freeing thought.

We, none of us are perfect.

We all sin and fall short of the glory of God.

Yet live into our vocation of a life of faith, and we are made complete through God's Spirit pulling us, like a holy gravity into Jesus' cruciform way.

So don't worry so much.

Be free in Christ.

This is what Jesus means when he tells us to be perfect.

He might as well have said – be complete, by living completely in me.

And wherever our lives may take us, in whatever settings and contexts we find ourselves, this is what faith is.

We don't know when and where we might be called upon to exercise an extraordinary act of forgiveness or grace.

And most of the time it will be in more ordinary routines that we must be perfect as our heavenly father is perfect.

But the call of Jesus remains constant for those who dare to follow him.

We hope and pray we can be constant too.

This call has been lived out by people in the direst and darkest moments of history and continues to be today.

I was reading a Christian journal this last week at two stories struck me particularly as I was reflecting on today's Gospel passage.

An 84 year old retired Anglican bishop in Uganda called Macleod Baker Ochola II is seeking to have a restorative justice process put in place in an area that has been dominated by the brutal 'Lord's Resistance Army' or LRA led by Jospheh Kony.¹

It's estimated that the LRA has killed over 100000 people since the 1980s and displaced 2.5 million more.

Ochola spent much of his time burying the dead and was for a time in exile himself due to the danger.

He lost his wife and his daughter as a result of the conflict and brutal violence of the rebel group.

Here is a man who has every reason to hate.

Every reason nearing the end of his life to let any attempts to inject love into this horrible scene blow away in the breeze.

And yet he fights.

Not with weapons, but with the love of God, even for his enemies.

¹ See the *Christian Century* February, 2017 for these stories.

He was walked and counselled returning child soldiers and advocated for one in particular to undergo a restorative justice process which will, he hopes, begin the path to reconciliation.

This is what he said: 'If there is no process of reconciliation, there is no healing, and if there is no healing there is no restoration and justice. Healing and restoration brings transformation of life for those affected.'

An Iraqi Christian Bishop called Yousif Mirkis told the story of the widow of a Japanese reporter who was kidnapped and killed in Fallujah.

Rather than despair she decided to fund the building of a hospital in the beleaguered city.

Bishop Mirkis described her offering thus: 'Instead of seeking revenge, she built a hospital and offered it to those who killed her husband. There's a lesson that should be repeated.'

While the Christian population of Iraq has gone from 1.5M to 300 000 over the last 15 years, Bishop Mirkis refuses to leave:

'For me, staying and resisting as a Christian minority is the right way.'

Whenever I read stories like this I can't help but think of the phrase 'first world problems' – that so many of the things we get conflicted about really pale into insignificance in the face of the struggles faced by those in other parts of the world.

I don't say this to make us feel guilty or insignificant.

We live in a time and place which very much needs living and active communities of Jesus.

We have an exacting and important role to play, in prayer for our brothers and sisters in crisis apart from anything else.

But perhaps such stories do give us some perspective.

Anyone who thinks Christian faith is weak and unable to address the hard things of life should ponder these stories deeply.

Even more incredibly in both these contexts Christians and non Christians, including Muslims, and those with no particular faith identification have worked together to seek forgiveness rather than revenge.

Something else we might reflect on a little in our often deeply polarising public conversations.

When MLK said that the universe bends towards justice he didn't mean the kind of justice meted out by law courts or enforced by the implied violence of armies, he meant God's justice of love, healing, and respect and dignity for all.

And if we can see that it can be lived in such conflicted and dangerous settings, perhaps we see that it can be lived in our daily lives as well.

Perhaps in our families or our community groups or with people up the street with whom we've become estranged for some reason.

Perhaps in the church even?

Perhaps we can see that we can be imperfect perfectionists of God's love and forgiveness revealed in Jesus.

And even that our lives can make a difference in contexts of despair and hopelessness in our own context.

That this is our true end, our true purpose, our true telos.

This is what being perfect looks like.

This is the last Sunday of Epiphany, the season of new revelation.

In a couple of weeks Lent will begin and we'll step onto the Calvary road once more.

So perhaps this is a good hinge point for us all.

A time to take stock of what's past, what's been revealed in this time and turn our gaze towards Jerusalem again.

Turn our eyes to the way of Jesus who reflected God's perfection, God's end and purpose in every possible way.

And in whose wake we follow in humility, in hope, and in love.

On the far horizon is Easter.

And Jesus is the star who will guide us there if we'll watch, and wait, and listen, and follow... after him.

To God be the Glory.

Amen.