

Get out of the way

St Philip's Anglican Church
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Leviticus 19.1-2, 9-18, Psalm 119.33040, 1 Cor 3.10-17, Matthew 5.3848

This is the last of our reflections on the Sermon on the Mount, that wonderful collection of Jesus teachings that begins to reveal the nature of God's coming Kingdom. The teachings are about more than laws and rules for they open up our hearts to the wonder and depth of God's love and how we can live in that love. This week we heard the last two teachings in chapter 5 – the command to not retaliate when someone does wrong against you but instead to give generously and the command to love your enemies. These two teachings are again about the primacy of relationships that are healed and whole. Just imagine if everyone on earth practised this teaching! What a profound difference it would make.

I want to start today with the verse at the end of this chapter, "*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect*". I don't know about you but when I hear this verse I inwardly groan. For me this is one of those verses of the bible that should have a health warning attached. I, I suspect like many people, have some 'isms' - unhelpful traits that get in the way of me enjoying life and doing God's work. My biggest 'ism' is perfectionism. I really want to do things perfectly. My whole upbringing one way or another taught me this was the way to function in the world – and guess what – I keep failing at being perfect over and over again. Well that makes complete sense. No one ever does something perfectly – well perhaps very, very rarely - when Joan Sutherland hits that one perfect note or Nadia Comoneci nails that back flip. Frankly perfectionism is an impossible ideal and a dead weight around our necks. Trying to be perfect and always failing just makes us mere mortals feel like failures. So when Jesus says be perfect as God is perfect my first reaction is to pack up and go home for a lie down in front of the telly. Be perfect like God??!! - The creator of the universe and eternal all-powerful love?! Be perfect like that?!

This could of course be another example of Jesus using hyperbole to get across his point. He has done this all through this section and it has been a powerful way to get the message across. However if we put this verse in the context of his life and particularly his teaching in this part of the Sermon on the Mount I think it is more than that. It has been said before but worth saying again - we need to read each verse of the bible in context and through the lens of Jesus Christ.

For example if we take the previous verse about turning the other cheek when someone strikes you on the face then we not only set ourselves up for physical abuse but we miss the point of the teaching. Jesus specifically says a 'slap on the right cheek'. This type of slap is either a blow from a left handed person or at the time was a metaphor for an insult affected with the right hand. Such an insult was recognized by Jewish law as an injury for which you could ask compensation before a judge. If someone insulted you, you could drag them off to the local judge and convince him that you required money in return for the harm done to you. Like Jesus whom they followed the early Christians suffered insults and derision – as do some modern day believers. This saying challenges Christians to accept insults without attempting to retaliate or seek compensation. This is of course exactly how Jesus responded to those who insulted and derided him. His non-violence, forgiveness and prayers for those who acted with such violence against him changed our world. For those who get the impact of his actions it makes all the difference.

So what does being perfect like God actually mean? If we go back to the beginning of this section Jesus says, *“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous”*. God in this picture is not partial in anyway. He loves indiscriminately. He is like the sun that shines on everyone and everything. He is like the rain that pours down goodness on all – the bad and the good. We may not be particularly happy with this picture of God, preferring instead a divine power that was more clearly for the good guys and against the bad ones, but that is not the God of Jesus Christ. This God is perfect in unstinting, abundant, overwhelming expression of love.

As followers of Christ we have access to this love – inside. We don't have to conjure it up or buy it off a shelf. It is just there, perhaps buried deep within, but still there. A beautiful old Jewish word for this is “Shekinah”. In the Hebrew Scriptures it meant the dwelling place of God. Through the Shekinah “God fills the world as the soul fills the body”. In Rabbinic writings the Shekinah was thought to manifest in the temple and in the Talmud it was reported as being present in acts of public prayer - *“Whenever ten are gathered for prayer, there the Shekinah rests”*. In esoteric Judaism it also had feminine overtones.

In the New Testament the Shekinah is commonly equated to the presence or indwelling of the Spirit of the Lord in each believer. It is in each of us individuals and in this community. We call this reality many things – the glory of God, the light of Christ and the Spirit of Christ.

So we have everything we need to be perfect as God is perfect, to be as constant and as indiscriminate in our love as he is –we just have to let the sun shine. We just have to consciously connect to the source within. In doing this we need to remember that love is not a feeling but an intention. That it is a conscious willed thought and act. The only thing stopping that connection and intention is yourself. It is my-self. Being perfect like God is not a matter of doing something to a perfect degree. Rather it is about getting out of the way so that the light can shine. We have the light of the Christ. The Shekinah is within each of us and in this community. We just have to let it out. There is so much in ourselves that gets in the way – fear, guilt, assumptions, resentments, laziness to name a few. The hard thing about loving our enemies, loving those who drive us mad, loving those we would rather never see again, is dealing with our own barriers and blockages.

If we go back to the beginning of this chapter we find that one of the first things that Jesus says is *“you are the light of world, let your light shine before others, so they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven”*. In the Greek both this verse and one about being perfect as God is perfect are emphatic sayings – Jesus is saying you let your light shine, you be perfect. There are no excuses and my goodness do we come up with some excuses that seem so reasonable.

There is the excuse of the rational thinker who thinks well of course it is logical that if someone injures you then it must be repaid by an equal pain. The punishment must fit the crime. An eye for an eye makes perfect sense and certainly stops the cycle of revenge killing. Once it is agreed that wrong has been done then doing unto the other as you think they deserve makes perfect sense. There is the excuse of the chronic victim whose whole identity is tied up with the wrong done to them and they find it impossible to let go and love. This is an extraordinarily painful place to be and people need a great deal of help and patience to shift this dominate story in their life.

There is the excuse of the anxious and fearful. This one is probably at the base of all those rusted on layers and all our excuses. We fear what will happen if we simply let go. What is reality like when we let go and let God's love work through us? When we give up judgment, condemnation and resentment? What lies beneath? We can apply this question to any person from the past or present. We can apply it to any issue with which we struggle. I encourage us all to break through into the light within and find out for ourselves.

Jesus does give us a powerful tool to break through our barriers and our excuses. He says – pray for your enemies, pray for those who you believe do you wrong. Like the practise of gratitude this is a reality shifter. It literally changes the way you look at the world. Not only that God sees your intention and honours your faithfulness. If you have anything against someone, either from the past or the present, take the time to pray for them. If someone has hurt you badly and the pain of that is crippling pray for them. Ask God to give them health, prosperity and happiness. Ask God to pour down blessing upon them.

Now this may stick in your gullet. You may feel like a fraud as you say it. You may say it but feel overwhelmed with negative feelings. As a friend of mine put it – I'd rather pray that that bloke gets everything he deserves. However persevere with the positive intention and prayer and do it regularly, daily if possible. Something begins to shift inside. The layers begin to unravel and we find a place of serenity, acceptance and love. We can find that place where we can love the person even though we do not condone or accept their actions. And we can have the knowledge that we are building relationships that are healed and whole. We find we are walking in the light.

Read through chapter 5 again keeping in mind:

- *The Sermon on the Mount is a doorway into what living in the Kingdom of God is all about. It emphasises who we are and who we are becoming, not what we possess or what we have done.*
- *It takes courage to live by these teachings and a connection with scripture and tradition.*
- *Jesus great concern was on healthy and whole relationships.*
- *The single, most effective thing we can do to live these teachings is to surrender our ego and let God's light shine.*