

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Part Two: A Pastoral Reflection

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IN THE EARLIER part of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount Jesus had warned his disciples that unless their righteousness exceeded that of the scribes and Pharisees, they would never enter the kingdom of heaven (5.20). In a series of six illustrations, he had proposed a conversion that moved well beyond the literalist preoccupations of the scribes and all ego-directed ethics, and was based instead on the way of love and the freely accepted vulnerability entailed in it.

Exceeding the Righteousness of the Pharisees

He concluded his reflection on the kind of conversion he called for by turning his attention to the Pharisees, specifically to their practices of piety—practices that were common to many other religious traditions, namely, voluntary almsgiving, prayer and fasting. The Sermon assumed that these practices were part, also, of the disciples' pursuit of righteousness.

Jesus said little about any intrinsic value in the customs, other than that 'the Father who sees in secret will reward you' (6.4,6,18). Rather, through them Jesus addressed, and rejected, the dynamic that governed all social interactions within the culture of the time, and that was based on a sense of mutual indebtedness. One good turn did not merely deserve another—it established a right to reciprocal benefit. If the benefit could not be returned in kind, the recipient incurred a debt of gratitude expressed by flattery and the payment of due 'honour' to the benefactor. Indeed, people's sense of personal identity was rooted in the

'honour' in which they felt themselves held by others. What mattered in the culture was not purity of heart but the extent to which people 'looked good' in the estimation of their neighbours. Deep in their hearts was a pervasive sense of rivalry, that led, in some cases, even to 'honour killings'. To 'lose face' was unbearable. Freely given love, and the deliberately accepted vulnerability inherent in it, were virtually unthinkable and certainly counter-cultural in both the Jewish and Roman worlds, though, in Jesus' mind, authentic love was the only way to genuine justice and peace. Such radical love still makes sense today only to those already embarked on the process of the 'second conversion'.

Almsgiving. Jesus' first target was almsgiving (6.1-4). Earlier in the Sermon, Matthew had included Jesus' injunction: 'Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you' (5.42). Given the social structures of the time, he had seen generosity to anyone in need as an essential response of discipleship, and had connected it with the freely-embraced cost and vulnerability of life in the kingdom. Here, he chose simply to require that it be done in secret (6.4); and contrasted such anonymity with the ostentatious giving of Pharisees (6.2).

Prayer. Jesus next addressed the issue of prayer (6.5-15). The point of prayer for disciples, in contrast to Pharisees and others, was not to look good before others (or even to feel good in oneself?). Prayer was to be done in private—a personal interaction with God who sees in secret (6.6).

Matthew then proceeded to critique what he saw as the Gentile approach to prayer (though it is to be found, in fact, among practitioners of all religions)—a search to control God by the selection and use of the right words and formulas. So often, prayer can in fact betray a lack of confident trust in God, rather than be a trusting encounter with a loving and caring God (6.7-8). Mature love surrenders the desire for control and is content to remain powerless and vulnerable before the one it loves.

Within this discussion of prayer Matthew inserted Jesus' outline of the prayer of the Christian community, what we have come to call 'The Lord's Prayer' (6.9-15).

Throughout the Sermon, Jesus had referred to God as 'your Father'. It is with this Father that the community engages as sons and daughters. It is a prayer made in solidarity with all fellow disciples, whom it recognises as brothers and sisters. The attitude is respectful, but intimate and trusting.

The first three statements are phrased reverentially in the passive voice: 'hallowed be thy Name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth'. Centuries before, the prophet Ezekiel had spoken of God hallowing his Name by reforming conquered Israel and making of it a nation that would respect justice and act with a 'pure heart' (Ezekiel 36.23-27). In the present context, the community prays that God would once more hallow his name through the coming of his kingdom. In the mind of Jesus, that kingdom would take shape as people accepted the vision of God, allowed themselves to be empowered by God's inclusive love, and did God's will in practice by acting according to the values of mercy, peace-making and purity of heart.

The thrust of the prayer is not to direct the hand of God, but to keep the mission of the community ever before its mind. The only life-giving power abroad in the world is the creative love of God. As that is believed, understood and taken hold of by disciples, they learn to critique their present cultural life-styles and,



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hand in hand with God, find themselves wanting and empowered to shape God's kingdom on earth.

The prayer next asks God to give to disciples, each day, their daily bread. The request echoes God's feeding of the Hebrew people in the desert of Sinai with bread from heaven, the manna (Exodus 16.17-21). According to the tradition, that bread was sufficient each day for everyone. But its nature was such that it could not be hoarded for future need. Receiving the bread was a clear act of trust in the God of 'enough'.

At the same time, the request expresses hope in the fullness of the kingdom when those who hunger and thirst for a world where justice reigns will have their fill. When prayed by disciples in today's global world, most of those praying do not have enough bread for their needs. The God of 'enough' is not the problem. Among the reasons for their poverty is the fact that the wealthy nations of the world choose not to share from their own relative super-abundance. The prayer presents a profound challenge for disciples in the Western world.

The prayer then has disciples pray for God's forgiveness. As in the earlier part of the prayer, the thrust of the plea is not to influence an otherwise unwilling or distracted God, but to alert disciples to the ongoing dynamic of life in the kingdom. Discipleship demands constant opening to the forgiving God, and surrender to the dynamic that carries disciples, in turn, to love and forgive each other. Rivalry and hostility are etched deep in the hearts of

all; they are the conditioned habits of the kingdoms of the world. Only gradually do disciples become aware how much these attitudes dominate their own lives. For Jesus, freely and deliberately chosen forgiveness was the way of the kingdom, the one and only way to break the destructive cycle of revenge and retaliation. It was firstly the way of God.

The petition used the word ‘debts’, rather than trespasses or sins; and thereby recalled the beautiful Hebrew tradition of the Jubilee Year, when slaves were freed, land was returned to its original owners, and debts were wiped. Obviously, the word was used metaphorically in relation to God; but its use served to situate discipleship within the context of God’s vision for a just world, modelled on, and empowered by, the freely given and indiscriminate love of God.

The prayer concludes with the plea that God protect disciples from temptation and the power of the evil one. Within the Gospel world view, temptation and testing by the evil one were specific. Matthew showed Jesus being tempted at the beginning of his public life and again immediately before his arrest and murder. The ultimate thrust of those temptations was to abandon his mission. Freely facing those temptations, Jesus reaffirmed his role to confront the world with its instinctive envy and violence, and to show another way, the way of the kingdom, which was the way of love, with its vulnerability and openness to exploitation. Matthew had indicated in the earlier part of his Sermon many of the practical applications of this approach.

For fragile disciples, the vulnerability of love is always problematic. Their efforts to pray the Lord’s Prayer honestly leads them to confront their weakness and invites them to turn in trust towards God.

At the end of the Lord’s Prayer Matthew reiterated the indispensable need for forgiveness; and added a statement which, on face value, insisted that God would not forgive those who refused to forgive others. Later in his narrative, he would attach a similar threat

to one of Jesus’ parables (18.35). Luke’s Gospel carries no such reference. The observation would seem to have either originated in Matthew’s community or been personally added by Matthew to emphasise his point.

Matthew’s desire to highlight forgiveness of others as constitutive of discipleship was laudable. However, in doing so, he made God’s forgiveness seem conditional. God’s love is not conditional. Indeed, God’s love is the starting point of all forgiveness. Until disciples understand God’s forgiveness, welcome it into their own lives, and allow themselves to be caught up into its intrinsic dynamism, they remain unmotivated and unable to forgive others. Perhaps Matthew’s intention was primarily to warn disciples—in the strongest terms he could think of.

Fasting. After his comments on almsgiving and prayer, Matthew recorded Jesus’ observation on fasting (6.16-18). As with almsgiving, Jesus assumed that disciples would fast, and warned that such fasting not be undertaken to gain honour from others. It was to be done in secret.

Jesus did not address the issue of why fast at all. He was aware how the prophets before him had criticised the human propensity to substitute religious ritual, including fasting, for the more demanding need for justice and peace. Later in the Gospel he would condemn scribes and Pharisees for falling into that trap (23.23-24). His advice to disciples was ambivalent: ‘The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them ... The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast (9.15).’ Did Matthew regard the bridegroom as present or absent? At the end of his Gospel he would have the risen (and ascended) Jesus assuring the disciples that he would be ‘with (them) always until the end of the age’ (28.20).

Reward and Punishment

On a number of occasions in the Sermon,

Matthew recorded Jesus using the language of reward and punishment. How are these terms to be understood?

There is a passage in the book 'The Way of a Pilgrim', a classic of Russian Orthodox spirituality, where the author wisely addressed the problem:

One who performs saving works simply from the fear of Hell follows the way of bondage, and he who does the same just in order to be rewarded with the Kingdom of Heaven follows the path of a bargainer with God. The one they call a slave, the other a hireling. But God wants us to come to him as sons to their Father ... he wants us to find our happiness in uniting ourselves with Him in a saving union of mind and heart. (SPCK, London, 1986, p.36)

God's rewards were not Matthew's prime concern, and may have served more as a literary balance to the 'honour' rewards universally sought within the culture. However, his references to punishment (more graphically described later in the narrative) often seem to be clearly intended.

People will understand the language of reward and punishment differently, depending on their levels of moral maturity.

Some will see them as extrinsic consequences, arbitrarily determined by some authority figure (in the current context, by God).

Others will consider them still as extrinsically imposed but no longer arbitrarily determined—depending, rather, on whether their behaviour has measured up to the expectations of significant others (of God) or to the reasoned requirements of social (or divine) law and order. Both categories have yet to embark on the journey of second conversion.

At a more mature level of sophistication, reward and punishment are not regarded as extrinsic factors at all. Rather, reward is no more than the conscious awareness (carrying into eternity) of inner harmony associated with genuine value and punishment is precisely the dissonance consequent on humanly destructive behaviour. Growth in love is its own (eternal) reward; refusal to love its own (eternal) punishment.

As with Jesus' earlier illustrations of moral behaviour, the references to reward and punishment more aptly have the force of parables, teasing the imagination and inviting ever deeper reflection.

Acquiring the Mind and Heart of Jesus

Accepting the vulnerability associated with genuine love, responding non-violently to aggression in ways that invite conversion, breaking free from the universally accepted assumptions and customs of the culture, do not come easily. They suppose a clear and unshakable trust in the God who raised Jesus from the dead. Such trust calls for continually deepening wisdom and maturity. Acquiring the mind and the heart of Jesus takes time, and does not happen automatically.

What are some of the factors that enable such growth? Matthew addressed these issues in what remains of the Sermon. (Most of the teachings are to be found also in Luke's Gospel, where they are not collated, as in Matthew's Sermon, but spread throughout the narrative.)

Human Desire. Matthew began with two comments dealing with the crucial issue of human desire. The first contrasted treasure on earth with treasure in heaven (6.19-21), and concluded with the observation, 'where your treasure is, there your heart will be also'. The second emphasised the need for clear and deliberate choice, 'you cannot serve God and wealth' (6.24).

The underlying issue is: what fascinates the heart? As human beings, our evolutionary inheritance has bequeathed to us the basic needs of survival, social belonging and security. These needs become translated into myriad desires that reach far beyond the original needs, and whose specific shapes we learn from others. In a world of limited resources, these desires give rise to competition, rivalry, envy, resentment and violence. It is these desires that shape the customs and interactions of the societies and cultures in which we live.

They become the values of Empire, the antithesis of the values of the Kingdom of God. Usually they are unrecognised; and their power is greater the more they remain hidden from awareness. The behaviours criticised by Jesus in the early section of the Sermon were all expressions of these desires.

Jesus understood that the basic human needs for survival, acceptance and security were, at their deepest level and in their proper human expression, the needs for life, love and trust. These he saw originating from and guaranteed by the creating and redeeming God. It is this insight that defines the true ‘treasures in heaven’, and that grounds the choice for God rather than wealth (and all it is mistakenly thought to bring).

Connecting the two observations of Jesus was his comment on the need for the ‘healthy eye’, the eye that sees with the clarity of love and discerns between superficial desires and the deepest needs of human hearts (6.22-23). This ‘healthy eye’ is at the same time a prerequisite for and a product of the on-going journey of conversion. It is the fruit of self-knowledge (which he would soon address) and a contemplative response to experience

Freedom to Trust. Matthew then added Jesus’ comment about worry (6.25-34), the frantic searching for security and control: ‘What are we to eat? What are we to drink? What are we to wear?’ Not that these things do not have their relative importance. What Jesus criticised was the insecurity driving the questions, and the lack of trust that they identified.

His response was to say that worry was unnecessary, and of itself unproductive and impotent: The birds sought their food, plants grew, the human body functioned - but they were not driven by worry. God provided resources in abundance. They only needed to be found.

In the human sphere, the greater problem lay in the fact that nature’s abundant resources were not being shared. The peasants of Galilee and the poor of Antioch went hungry, unhoused

and poorly dressed, because those with power were unwilling to share, ultimately because they were themselves frightened of the desire-driven selfishness of everyone else. Theirs, precisely, was a problem of trust.

Jesus’ solution was clear: ‘Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well’. Firstly, learn to trust, then learn to share, and all will have their fill.

Self-awareness. Where to start to deal with the fearful selfishness and rivalry driving social interactions? Matthew listed two teachings of Jesus pertinent to the problem, both of them in their separate ways addressing the issue of self-knowledge.

He began by briefly revisiting the comment made by Jesus earlier in the Sermon (5.21-26) where he had warned against anger and condemnation (which could lead in extreme cases to the ultimate response of murder) (5.21-26). This time (7.1-5), he insisted: ‘Don’t judge—or you will be judged similarly’. Matthew’s use of the passive voice probably meant that God would be the judge. As noted earlier, such threats are best understood as quasi-parabolic statements, interpreted differently according to people’s levels of moral maturity.

Jesus then gave the wonderfully graphic illustration of what current psychology would call the process of transference or projection. We see the ‘speck in our neighbour’s eye’ but do not see the ‘log’ in our own.

Effectively Jesus was addressing the problem at the root of much injustice and aggression, both personal and social. What disturbs us in others, particularly when the disturbance carries a strong emotional content, is almost certainly what we fail to recognise in ourselves. We see others as competitors, as threats to our own self-interest and desires. We blame them for their negative attitudes and hostility towards us. In reality, by blaming them, we divert attention from the hostility and violence unconsciously lurking in our own hearts.

The problem is exacerbated in the broader

society. Rather than addressing the simmering hostility poisoning community relationships, societies scapegoat unpopular minorities, or other nations, and blame them for their problems. The problem is never with ‘us’—it lies with ‘the axis of evil’ arrayed against us! Blame the other! The solution to the problem, in Jesus’ mind, was simple—self-awareness. Without it, genuine conversion is impossible.

Matthew continued the reflection by recounting Jesus’ teaching about the need ‘to ask, search and knock’ (7.7-11). Jesus addressed the question introduced earlier in the Sermon—the confusion between needs and desires. Desires come to be felt as needs. Ultimately, they become disconnected from needs, and assume value in their own right. How to break free from the deception? The answer again is simple—by growing in self-knowledge.

We begin by bringing our desires into the open; and we do it in the presence of God. We start from where we are, by ‘asking’ God for what we think we want. We need to be honest and real; otherwise God cannot make contact with us. If our immediate request is not answered, provided we persevere by searching and knocking (looking into the unexplored), we begin to question ourselves whether what we have asked for is what we really want. Our search goes deeper. Over time, with persistence, our prayer changes in light of our growing insight. Our desires align with our basic human needs simply for life, love and trust. We finish up recognising that what we really want for ourselves is precisely what God wishes to grant. We discover that the Lord’s Prayer becomes our own prayer.

Between Jesus’ two reflections on self-knowledge, Matthew inserted a short but puzzling warning not to ‘give what is holy to dogs’ or to ‘throw pearls before swine’ (7.6). Without any context beyond that given here, it is difficult to be sure what Jesus was referring to, or indeed why Matthew chose to insert it. It is not found in Luke’s Gospel. For the Jew-

ish members of Matthew’s community, ‘dogs’ may have been a derogatory term sometimes used for Gentiles, and mention of ‘swine’ carried a similar connotation. But there were also Gentile members in the community, who would hardly have appreciated being referred to in that way. Some more general application seems to be needed.

Why did people insult, revile and persecute disciples (or, in our Western world, simply ignore us, see us as irrelevant or pushing hidden agendas)? Why it is that things that excite us and seem so clear and even beautiful do not affect others in the same way? The blame may not always lie solely with others. We need to be aware of the possibility of the ‘log’ in our own eye—our own prejudices—obscuring the way we see others.

Clearly, we are sent to be salt of the earth and light of the world (5.13-16). Already the Sermon has made the point that the expectation of being misunderstood and opposed is no reason to desist from sharing what we believe in. How to evangelise? Insistence on what we see to be the truth, aggressively asserted from a position of assumed superiority, often invites automatic rejection, especially in a world that has become cynical and anti-authoritarian. Pope Paul VI wrote insightfully about the need to enter into respectful dialogue with others as the primary means of evangelisation.

Practical Reminders. Before summing up the Sermon, Matthew added two more brief observations of Jesus.

The first was an example of widely shared wisdom, already appreciated by Jewish scribes. Of itself, it sounds rather utilitarian and pragmatic, a rule of thumb, by no means exhaustive but helping to translate into practice the multiple imperatives of the Law: ‘in everything do to others as you would have them do to you’ (7.12). Within the Sermon it presumed the motivation and the all-inclusive vision of the kingdom already indicated—‘the fulfilment of the Law and the prophets’. Dis-

ciples were to take the initiative to break the endless cycle of desire, envy and hostility in which the world was enslaved, and meet them, rather, with consistent mercy, non-violent love and reconciliation.

The second observation was simply a reminder that the ‘road to life is hard’ and the ‘gate is narrow’ (7.13-14). The alternatives are clear. The choice for life must be deliberate. The observation did not say anything necessarily about the relative populations of heaven and hell. Jesus’ immediate concern was with the personal and social experience of life in God’s kingdom on earth. Certainly, present choices will resonate into eternity; but about the details of that eternity we know little. We all need to trust in a merciful and forgiving God.

The Imperative of Action. The Sermon concluded with three illustrations of the insistent need to put the message of Jesus into practice.

The first (7.15-20) maintained that the criterion by which orthodoxy would be discerned (distinguishing the ‘false’ from the true prophet) was ‘good fruit’. The second (7.21-23) clarified the meaning of ‘good fruit’, stating that it consisted in doing ‘the will of my Father in heaven’, namely, that his kingdom come on earth. Truly orthodox disciples, there-

fore, would be those resolutely committed to practical mercy, purity of heart and peace-making, who, by their lived example, called people away from competitiveness and rivalry to reconciliation and mutual support. They would truly be like ‘a wise man who built his house on rock’ (7.24-27).

Concluding Comment

Matthew concluded with the crowds’ astonishment at the authority with which Jesus taught (7.29). Whatever about the crowds’ discernment, for Christian disciples the authority of Jesus lies firmly in the truth of his resurrection. Jesus had lived what he taught. He had loved even his enemies, accepting the vulnerability and openness to victimisation contained in all genuine love. He could rejoice and be glad. He had faced into death, trusting in God. And God had raised the crucified Jesus. By removing the finality of death, God showed that trust, mercy and hope transcend human limitations. Though open to exploitation in the short term, they are the indispensable means of entry into the kingdom. This ‘healthy eye’ is at the same time a prerequisite for and a product of the on-going journey of conversion. It is the fruit of self-knowledge (which he would soon address) and a contemplative response to experience.

In the piety of the church God has often been tamed and made innocuous; the living God who appeared to Moses in the burning bush (Ex 3,6.14) is barely recognisable in the ‘dear God’ of pious parlance. Therefore it does not suffice to speak of vague experiences of the divine, it is essential to speak of the God to whom the Bible bears witness, to be precise, of the ‘God of Jesus Christ’, that is to speak of God as he has been revealed in the face of Jesus Christ as a benevolent God, friend to mankind.

—Cardinal Walter Kasper, ‘The Timeliness of Speaking of God’. Newman Lecture, May 2, 2008