

SERMON – 23/2/25
'The Sermon on the Plain'

Luke 6:27-38

Jesus said: "Do to others as you would have them do to you."
(Luke 6:31)

What is known as the Golden Rule is sometimes said to be the thread that unites all the world's religions and moral philosophies and you will find few people who would disagree with its sentiment of what is known as the ethics of reciprocity. The Jewish *Talmud* sums up the Law of Moses in these terms: 'That which is hateful to you, do not do to another.' The Hindu *Mahabarata* encapsulates the rule of dharma in these words: 'One should never do that to another which one regards as injurious to one's own self.' Confucius said, 'That which you do not desire, do not do to others.' Buddha said, 'Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.' The African Yoruba religion puts it rather more colourfully, in suggesting that 'One who is going to take a pointed stick to pinch a baby bird should first try it on himself to feel how it hurts.'

But it's interesting that it is Jesus (and the prophet Mohammed later follows His lead) who, rather than saying '*Don't* do to others what you *don't* want them to do to you' turns the Golden Rule on its head and exhorts us to act positively and pre-emptively: "Do to others as you would have them do to you." And it is that theme of striking first in grace that I want to highlight this morning – we'll come back to that.

But let me just remind you of the context. We have almost completed our journey through the season of Epiphany. Next Sunday it reaches its climax as we come to reflect on the story of the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain top when His glory is revealed to Peter, James and John, before we turn the corner into Lent and the way of the Cross. The question for each of us this morning is how we find ourselves responding to the Gospel revelation of who Jesus is.

Allow me to suggest that while we may have found stories like the coming of the wise men to Bethlehem or the turning of the water into wine at Cana in Galilee or the coming of the Holy Spirit

upon Jesus at His baptism to be uplifting and exhilarating, we may increasingly have been challenged (as those who first encountered Jesus during His earthly ministry were) by His preaching, whether in the synagogue at Nazareth when He revealed Himself to be the Messiah, at the lake-shore when He called people to leave everything and follow Him or, as Alex described last week in the Sermon on the Plain, when Jesus' words caused as many people to turn from Him and walk away as were drawn to Him.

Our reading this morning was also from the Sermon on the Plain, Luke's equivalent to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel. Both contain much of the same challenging teaching and we can safely assume that what is given to us in both places takes us right to the heart of Jesus' preaching wherever He went during His earthly ministry.

Make no mistake, we come up against some extremely challenging teaching here, and don't let anyone tell you that the Old Testament or Paul's letters are the hardest bits of the Bible to read. If anyone suggests that the Gospels are somehow 'entry-level' Christian teaching they are either not actually reading them or they are in for a shock when they try to live it out.

Last week we heard Jesus declare that it is the poor and the hungry and those who weep who find blessing through the Gospel and that the rich in this world and the well-fed and those who laugh will find much greater challenge in God's Word and in the ways of the Kingdom. In this morning's reading, Jesus continues in similar vein, addressing His words "to those who are listening."

Are we listening this morning? Hear again the Word of God, and don't just let familiar words wash over you - rather, listen for what God is asking of *you* through these words this morning, specifically *how* the Lord Jesus is asking you to do to others as you would have them do to you.

'Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you.' Maybe you don't consider yourself to have any enemies, maybe nobody hates you or curses you or ill-treats you. Be thankful, for there are plenty of folk would wish they were in your shoes.

But how would you hear these words this morning if you were an Israeli whose daughter or grandson was one of those taken hostage or murdered by Hamas, or if you were a Palestinian returning to the wreckage of what had been your home before it was bombed by the Israeli Defence Force? 'Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.' Could you do that in their shoes?

How would you hear these words if you were a Ukrainian who had fled your homeland or who was living under Russian occupation or under nightly air-raids, or if you were a Russian whose son had been conscripted into the army and whose body was returned in a coffin or if you were living under Ukrainian occupation in Kursk? 'Bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you. Could you do that in their circumstances? Can you do it in our context?

That is what Christ is asking of our Israeli and Palestinian and Russian and Ukrainian brothers and sisters, and He is asking no less of us. He goes on to give some more specific (and no less challenging) examples: 'If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back.' If you have ever been physically assaulted or robbed or burgled, how did you respond?

Even these are fairly extreme examples and so Jesus continues to explain what He means and to drill right down to the Kingdom principle He is expounding, namely to do to others first what you would have them do to you, rather than waiting to see what others will do to you and then giving as good as you get.

Jesus says, 'If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full.'

That's the way of the world, Jesus is saying, and anyone can do what comes naturally, humanly speaking. If someone is kind and

generous to us, it's much easier for us to be kind and generous back. But Jesus repeats His challenge to us to be counter-cultural and to model the better way of the Kingdom of God. 'Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back... Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you.'

The secular humanists like to suggest that not a single version of the Golden Rule requires a God but I rather think they are failing to discern that doing to others as you would have them do to you does not come naturally to us as human beings. We need help.

So it is of no little significance that Jesus concludes what He has to say in this morning's reading by pointing out not only the rewards of living the way of the Kingdom (namely that 'you will be children of the Most High') but also the motivation and the heavenly empowerment that comes from choosing the way of grace. What Christ is saying is that if you see and acknowledge and (most importantly) have personal experience of the fact that the Most High is 'kind to the ungrateful and wicked' (because you know that He has been kind to you) then you will be able to 'be merciful just as your Father is merciful... [And] a good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap.'

That is the message of the transforming power of grace that is, I think, at the very heart of the Sermon on the Plain and indeed of the whole teaching of Jesus and the faith and lifestyle it inspires.

So my question to you this morning is not how good you are at loving your enemies, doing good to those who hate you, blessing those who curse you and praying for those who ill-treat you, because I know what the answer is likely to be. No, my question to you today is whether you know just how kind and generous and merciful and gracious God has been to you in Jesus Christ. Take time today and every day to ponder the goodness of God and the blessings He has showered upon you. In acknowledging and confessing the ways in which you have fallen short of His high standards, pause and consider just how much He has forgiven you. Let that be your meditation today (and every day) and more and more you will discover in the atmosphere of grace that you can do nothing but love even your greatest enemy, do

good to those who do bad things to you, forgive those who have wronged you. And you will find that it is absolutely the most natural thing of all to walk in the ways of the Kingdom of God and to do to others as you would have them do to you.

Let me close with the words from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians that I used at the start of the service to call us to worship:

"It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." (Eph.2:8-10)

You have been born anew in Christ Jesus for this, to be gracious to others as God has been gracious to you. Now, go and be that person.

"Do to others as you would have them do to you."