



## Revd Ro's Reflection on Third Sunday before Lent Year A

**1 Corinthians 2.1-12 [13-16]**

**Matthew 5.13-20**

It has been many years ago now since I sang Evensong and many more since I led it. I must admit I enjoyed it; I enjoyed the Sunday by Sunday rhythm of the similar services and the music. I also enjoyed the poetry of the old service book. Those of you who remember it will remember singing the Magnificat and the Nunc Dimittis. This is, of course, the Song of Simeon when he holds the young child Jesus at his presentation in the Temple.

<sup>29</sup> 'Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace according to thy word.

<sup>30</sup> For mine eyes have seen thy salvation;

<sup>31</sup> Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;

<sup>32</sup> To be a light to lighten the Gentiles and to be the glory of thy people Israel.' (Luke 2)

I quote it because February 2nd was Candlemas, The Presentation of Christ in the Temple. Simeon was promised he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. As he holds the child he has his epiphany moment and it prompts these wonderful words and indeed his prophecy. Jesus is the King of the world whose word will enlighten both Jews and Gentiles. God's new creation begins with him. Our readings have moved on now, the gospel last week was from John the account of Jesus' first miracle at Cana in Galilee. If we go back to our reading from Matthew we remember it was concerned with the calling of the disciples at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. We are told of Jesus' healing ministry and power over disease and illnesses of every kind. Obviously people flocked to him both in the hope of a cure and to see this amazing young rabbi who had such power.

<sup>25</sup> 'And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.' (Matthew 4)

What follows, in Matthew's gospel is what we call 'The Beatitudes,' the beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

'When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup> Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

<sup>3</sup> 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' (Matthew 5)

We are probably so familiar with them that we don't always stop to think about them. What they are not is a conventional list of teachings about life. Jesus is talking about people who already have these attributes. If we look at them they seem very strange.

<sup>5</sup> 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. <sup>6</sup> 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.'

It is an upside down set of sentences and certainly not conventional. The meek don't inherit the earth, usually they are downtrodden. I said last week that Jesus is not conventional. His standards are not the world's standards at all. Compare this to Mary's Song,

<sup>51</sup> 'He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

<sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;

<sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.' (Luke 1)

These are the promises of God. This is the reversal of normality. This will happen because the Kingdom of God has come upon the earth. Then the meek will indeed inherit the earth! Jesus is bringing in the good news of the Kingdom and in God's recreated order all will be thus. The Kingdom of God has come near because it came with Jesus. These are the Kingdom values and it is up to each one of us to recognise that and to live according to Jesus' teaching. Look how Jesus addresses his audience in today's reading,

<sup>13</sup> 'You are the salt of the earth;'

That of course has passed into normal vocabulary to mean a decent and worthwhile person to be relied on. But as always Jesus' expressions contain a wealth of meaning which would not have been missed by his original audience. Now we may think of salt as something that we put on food or dishes to enhance their flavour or make them better. For Christmas someone gave me a pack of Dead Sea salt. Salt as we know is a vitally important commodity without which we cannot live. It is used in industry and I was watching a TV programme which showed a Roman salt pan from Cheshire used to pan brine. It was heated and the salt extracted. Indeed salt was sometimes used as payment in the Roman army, they could make money out of the very necessary commodity, hence the expression; 'He or she is not worth their salt!' Salt of course is used in dyeing as a fix for the colours. The main use of salt though was for preservation, to stop the growth of bacteria and to stop things going bad. This is the main thrust of Jesus' meaning here and his original audience would have realised what he meant. Well the trouble was that the Jews, God's chosen people who should have been the salt of the earth, the ones who should stop the rot, had strayed from God; they had, if you like, 'gone bad' the very thing they should be preventing. The warning is clear,

<sup>13</sup> 'but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.'

There is only one way forward, they needed to turn to Jesus who brought in a new way. They must turn back to God and his commandments. They needed to stop evil by the example of lives lived for God. Jesus continues with another illustration,

<sup>14</sup> 'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden.'

I love that. Jesus has said in his famous 'I am' sayings, 'I am the light of the world.' Now here he is saying, 'You are the light of the world,' of course he was talking to the Jews but it applies to each one of us. I remember saying before that I had seen the Mappa Mundi in Hereford Cathedral and unlike our maps Jerusalem, the city set on a hill, is at the centre! Well, Jesus is saying, you Jews are supposed to be God's chosen people with the centre of your worship the Temple on the hill in Jerusalem, so you should be a shining example to the world. You should be showing people the way God meant human beings to behave. You should follow his commandments in your daily lives and be a beacon of God's light. Of course so many were anything but and wars and evil behaviour were rife in the world.

<sup>15</sup> 'No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. <sup>16</sup>In the same way let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.'

Recently someone gave me a present, a picture based on this verse, it said, 'You're here to be light bringing out the God colours in the world.' The more I think about that the more I like it because Jesus is saying exactly that to every one of us. We should be a light to the world, not only in our own individual behaviour but by trying to illuminate the dark places with God's love, even if this is only in a small way by going to someone who is lonely and visiting them. He is not talking about so-called piety or showing off; he condemns that in the Pharisees and those who make a great show of religious observances. He is talking about the practical living out of God's commandment of love in the lives of the Jewish people and indeed it applies to every one of us. So he says,

<sup>17</sup> 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil.'

The law was given by God to guide the people so that they could live according to God's way. The Jewish scriptures point one way, to the Messiah, God's anointed one, who will come and fulfil the prophecies. Here he stands before them, Messiah and God but will they recognise him!

<sup>19</sup> 'Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.'

The commandments of God are right and the guide for life. They and we must live according to God's teachings, to break them is to turn your back on God and it is a sin to take others from the path of God. Go back to the light image. Their job and ours is to draw people to God, to Jesus, by following his teachings and living it out in our lives. That is, not obeying selfish desires, but God's commands.

We must think too, when we hear the words 'in the kingdom of heaven' what Jesus means when he says, 'The Kingdom of heaven has come near.' Indeed it has; Jesus brought in the Kingdom, it is not a place to go after death, though of course we will be reunited with God, it is here and now, waiting for all who will walk with Jesus. Jesus turned the established standards of the world on their head. Think back to the beatitudes. He is establishing a kingdom whose foundation is love. Whose new commandment, 'Love one another as I have loved you' should be emblazoned in our hearts and lived out in our lives. The question Jesus asks his original audience and every one of us is; are you

prepared to live that out? His way is not about rites and rituals, it's not about power. It's about compassion and caring and putting God at the centre.

<sup>20</sup> 'For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.'

Jesus inaugurated the new beginning, God's new order. In God's time he will restore the earth to all it should have been and the kingdom values will be established on earth as in heaven, that is, God's realm which will be here with us and Jesus will come again to reign in God's perfected world. This is what we are commissioned to work towards. Jesus lived it all out for us, he was the 'light of the world' and his shining light has been taken to the world. As Simeon's prophecy foretold, Jesus is, 'a light to lighten the Gentiles and to be the glory of his people Israel.'

This telling of the good news was the commission of everyone who turned to Jesus, it is our commission now. St. Paul, the greatest of all Christian missionaries, had this to say to the Corinthians,

<sup>2.1</sup> 'When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. <sup>2</sup> For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.'

Paul gets to the heart of the matter of the gospel and not by using the clever debating skills and arguments of those who delighted in rhetoric, the intellectual speakers that the Corinthians were used to. Paul has no need of clever arguments;

His message is unique because it is God's truth, spoken in God's power. It stands out for itself. Jesus is at the centre. As I have said before and as St. Paul says, his message must sound like madness. So of course when he first spoke to the Corinthians, used to polished debaters, they must have been shocked.

<sup>3</sup> 'And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.'

What a very humble and human statement, of course he felt trepidation. And yet, Paul was not speaking in his own power but in the power of the Spirit. He is proclaiming God's good news. Paul let the power of God act through him,

<sup>4</sup> 'My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, <sup>5</sup> so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.'

Paul proclaims Christ crucified. Think of that for a minute, hearing it for the first time. Crucifixion was disgusting, a way that traitors were executed by the Romans because it was so vile, as an example to others. Yet here is this man, Paul, standing up and saying Jesus, who died on a cross, is the saviour of the world! The point is of course that it didn't stop at the cross. Jesus was raised from the dead as he prophesied.

<sup>20</sup> 'But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. <sup>21</sup> For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being;' (1 Corinthians 15)

That is the heart of his message. Paul says Jesus inaugurated the new way of God; he brought in values which are simply foolishness to the powers of this world.

<sup>6</sup> 'Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. <sup>7</sup> But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God



decreed before the ages for our glory. <sup>8</sup> None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.' (1 Corinthians 2)

God's plan, fulfilled by Jesus, has changed the world and turned the accepted values on its head, and it will continue to do so.

Pause for a minute and think of how you came to faith. Many of us were probably baptised as children and didn't know anything about it, but there came the time when we decided for ourselves, thought it out and committed our lives to the way of Jesus. We did so not by traditional logic but by faith, by trust. The Corinthian Christians are being asked to do that. Jesus' way is entirely countercultural. It's not conventional wisdom. But Jesus has won salvation and eternal life with God for all who truly turn to him. We can never hope to fully understand the mystery of God let alone express it.

<sup>9</sup> 'But, as it is written,  
'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,  
nor the human heart conceived,  
what God has prepared for those who love him' —

It is too big for us to understand but Jesus, God incarnate, came to humans, walked with us and humanity saw the face of God in Jesus. And of course we still do. Paul's question is; will you turn to the God of love in Jesus Christ? Will you live according to his teaching! That means having faith, having trust.

<sup>10</sup> 'these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. <sup>11</sup> For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God.'

The Holy Spirit of God is at work here. Paul speaks in the power of the Spirit of God and it is the Spirit of God that turns lives around. We have to trust in God and take that step of faith. We can never hope to fully understand until we are reunited with our Father. Paul reiterates that he speaks through the Spirit and only through God's power,

<sup>12</sup> 'Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. <sup>13</sup> And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.'

He poses a question, are you willing to continue to follow Jesus Christ as saviour and redeemer? Sadly, as he says, so many people will not do so,

<sup>14</sup> 'Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are discerned spiritually. <sup>15</sup> Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny.'

These Corinthians addressed in this letter have already turned to Jesus but we remember there is trouble, not only faction and squabbles but actually straying from the truth of the teaching to follow false teachers and false doctrines. Paul has to bring them back to the truth of Jesus. There is nothing traditionally logical in Christ's message. But Jesus is the only Lord and King, not pagan gods, not Caesar the self-styled god, no, only Jesus is Lord. Are you prepared to follow him in faith and if necessary to die for him?

As we see if we read chapter 3 there is still trouble with the early Corinthian church but Paul's message shines clearly to them and indeed to us.

*'A perfect life of perfect deeds once to the world was shown; that people all might mark his steps and in them plant their own.'* Somerset Corrie Lowry

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