

A Sermon of "mountainous" proportions!

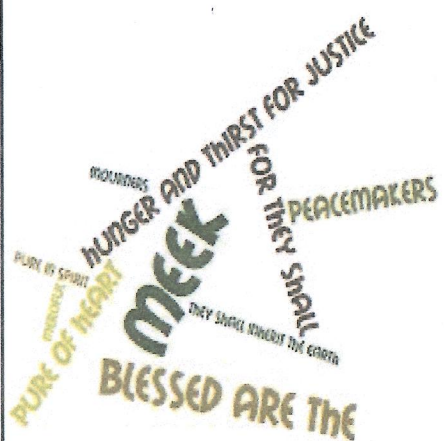


I said on Sunday past that Matthew the evangelist shows Jesus to be a master teacher and a great storyteller throughout his Gospel. Jesus' teaching skill is evidenced in a special way in the *Sermon on the Mount* which we are reading these Sundays before Lent.

Matthew, writing his Gospel (probably in Antioch about the year 85) has a fine line to tread. His community there is burgeoning with Gentile Christians, and yet many of his original readers would have been Jewish converts to Christianity and so he both wants to show the Jewish readers that all their hopes and longings for the Messiah are now fulfilled in Jesus, and at the same time reassure the Gentiles that their path of conversion to Jesus, without the Jewish experience, is equally valid.

Antioch was a bustling centre of commerce and growth at the time. The many who had heard of Jesus and wanted to be admitted into the community must have been asking themselves at first, *How Jewish must we become in order to embrace Jesus? Must we be circumcised and follow the Jewish dietary laws?* Questions abounded regarding how much of the Jewish tradition needed to be incorporated into this Gentile future.

With the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in the year 70, Jerusalem lost its centre of worship and discipline. Public Jewish worship then dispersed into the synagogues and the Jewish followers of Jesus at first continued to attend. With Judaism itself under increased threat, the leaders decided they needed more control and so expelled the "heretics and Christians" from the synagogues, a reality prophesied by Jesus in the Gospel of John. As good Jews, the followers of Jesus would regularly have attended synagogue worship. With expulsion they were cut from their moorings, so to speak.



Matthew makes the Sermon on the Mount a universal call to Holiness, accessible to all, whatever their religious background. It starts with the well known Beatitudes but continues over three whole chapters: 5-7 in the Gospel. It can be helpful to read it as a whole in one sitting to grasp its essential "seamlessness". The scholar John Pilch suggests that the Sermon on the Mount is the "Christian honour code". In it, Jesus claims that God honours and makes blessed his chosen ones. But the disciples must live - as we hear this Sunday - with an honour which exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees.

Another writer, Giorgio Gonella, teaches that the Greek text of Matthew's beatitudes has no verb. "Blessed you!" is a cry of exultation, a good news, a congratulations. The words of the beatitudes are about blessing, grace, covenant and a call to life and true happiness, from Jesus the Teacher.

Much respected scripture scholar Daniel Harrington writes:

The Sermon on the Mount is not simply a new set of laws but a proclamation of the Gospel. God has entered into the believer's heart and now he or she can live life based on that good news. The sermon is not just ethics or morality, but a lived faith which is actually experienced at least sometimes in life".

At the heart of everything Jesus taught was the coming of the Kingdom. He was sent to bring it. And through his death and resurrection he has done so. The kingdom of God is among us – present mysteriously, awaiting its final and full manifestation. The Sermon on the Mount is our Lord's vision of life under the Kingship of God. He affirms divine principles and illustrates them. He appeals to our spiritual imagination as he pictures attitudes and behaviours that will shine out in us, as the Kingdom, the reign of God, becomes a reality in us. He is giving us the chance to be like him – because the kingdom is first and foremost himself.

In his words, *Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect* (next Sunday) he challenges his listeners to aim for the best, the highest, whatever their situation in life. Have the same goal, same outlook, same intention as *your Father in heaven who causes his sun to rise and his rain to fall on the just and the unjust alike*. 'Aim higher, friends'. The tax-collectors aim at money, a good salary, the Greeks aim at a pleasant social coexistence. But to his own he says, "Aim higher". **Think God!**