

February 12th 2017 – 3rd Sunday before Lent

Readings:

Ecclesiasticus 15: 15-20

1 Corinthians 3: 1-9

Matthew 5: 21-37

It's your choice

Life is about choices – you chose to come here today, and now you've chosen to sit and listen to me. Maybe you didn't realise you had a choice but please don't leave now!

I want to start by talking about our gospel reading and then come on to talk about choices later. The verses I read from Matthew's gospel are part of the long passage we call the Sermon on the Mount. We are very familiar with parts of it – it begins with the Beatitudes – all those different ways in which people might be blessed – as meek, merciful, poor, persecuted and so on. It includes Jesus teaching his disciples to pray using those words which we use in all our services and day by day – calling God our Father.

We might think at first glance that today's verses are going over some very familiar ground – the Ten Commandments, but on closer reading it is clear that Jesus has a very radical and new approach which the people listening may have found difficult to accept. Perhaps in our familiarity with these words they have lost their cutting edge – we have forgotten that Jesus always asks us to go the extra mile, to put our own comfort to one side, and to be prepared to put others before self.

The key to the whole passage is relationships. Let's have a closer look – it starts on p.4 of the NT section of your bibles.

Verses 21 to 26 are about the damage done to relationships by anger. The original commandment – do not kill – is well known. Everyone knows killing people is wrong. But Jesus says that insulting people, to their faces or in your thoughts – writing people off as worthless – is just as bad as killing them. It destroys a relationship. And it can spread like a virus – look at the damage done by thoughtless and malicious use of social media, or an email that gets into the public domain. Someone's reputation might be ruined, it can lead to scapegoating of a section of society, and the ultimate of that of course is genocide. Extreme? But that is what can happen when anger goes unchecked, and when people choose to persist in thinking that others are a waste of space – and putting those thoughts into action. It can build into something very dangerous and evil.

Sometimes we can't help getting angry – it's a very natural reaction. Jesus himself got angry, but it's what you choose to do about it that matters. We need to learn to cultivate peace, to seek reconciliation – and not to harbour resentment. If you don't know how to deal with it – as the hymn says – take it to the Lord in prayer. Let his love overcome your anger. Don't allow your anger to burn away inside you – Jesus says harbouring bad thoughts about someone is as bad as taking action against them because the relationship is broken, and cannot be mended until one of you seeks reconciliation and the other responds in friendship, not in anger.

But let's face it – we are only human, and sometimes someone might hurt us so badly there can be no reconciliation – not in the short-term and maybe not even in the longer term. Are we then in danger of the judgement Jesus says is coming to those who persist in harbouring angry thoughts? Well, one thing is for sure – God forgives us even if the one we've fallen out with doesn't. What if we

February 12th 2017 – 3rd Sunday before Lent

can't forgive them? Jesus tells us we must, otherwise we can't be forgiven for the things we do wrong. Our broken relationships affect your relationship with God as well.

What is true is that it is very difficult to experience the depth of God's love and forgiveness if we are holding on to some anger or resentment against someone else. But it takes time and I'm sure God understands that. Sometimes the pain we cause one another can't just be forgotten as if it had never happened. But rather than letting it fester we can perhaps try to find a way of moving on. Maybe it can be like a painful bereavement where you don't really get over it – you just get better at dealing with it. Some verses from later on in Ecclesiasticus, where our first reading came from – ch. 28 v1-4

- ¹The vengeful will face the Lord's vengeance,
for he keeps a strict account of their sins.
- ²Forgive your neighbour the wrong he has done,
and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray.
- ³Does anyone harbour anger against another,
and expect healing from the Lord?
- ⁴If someone has no mercy towards another like himself,
can he then seek pardon for his own sins?

The writer says we can't expect a blessing from God if we are harbouring anger against someone. If we want peace in our hearts and in our relationship with God we have to examine our hearts and see what it is that is preventing us from knowing God's peace and healing.

In his teaching, Jesus is pointing to is the life of the kingdom to come where there will be no bad relationships, where reconciliation will be complete, and all will be forgiven. He encourages us to aim for that level of perfection in this life, because if we are people of the kingdom we need to live as if it were a present reality.

It might help to remember that Matthew was writing all this for a tightly knit community of believers who had converted from Judaism and needed to find a way of holding that little community together in the face of opposition and persecution. Falling out with one another would have fragmented the community and put it at risk. It was a time and context when the needs of the community had to take precedence over people's individual rights and feelings.

Is it so very different today, when the church in this country is under pressure from all directions? We need to bear with one another as we strengthen the ties that bind us together and make us the Body of Christ within this community of Streatham. Not only that, we live in a society where people seem to get angry very easily – sometimes, it has to be said, with some reason. The church has to be a source and a resource of reconciliation, peace-making, bringing people together. It's difficult to do that when the church itself is not at one – and we know that there are deep divisions within the wider church. General Synod meets this coming week and no doubt there will be some evidence of the disagreements that are keeping people apart in the church – when there should be reconciliation. Here in our own church family we need to encourage unity – not sameness – we honour our diversity – but we need to do all we can to build up relationships and create a sense of oneness in Christ that shows we love one another for his sake.

Jesus goes on in verses 27-30 to talk about adultery and lust. Remember that the context is a very male-dominated society where the men could do as they liked and the women had to put up with it. There was no equality in the law for women, and life could be very difficult if a relationship broke

February 12th 2017 – 3rd Sunday before Lent

down. Jesus points out that lustful actions begin in the mind and just as harbouring angry thoughts is to be condemned, so it is with the thoughts that lead to wrong action. It's about having the right attitude of respect towards one's marriage partner – and to that extent we can say that it is just as relevant today. Adultery violates a relationship, and Jesus says, adultery begins in the mind. A man who looks lustfully at the woman next door has already committed adultery. And in our society of equality – he would no doubt include women in his teaching.

The other side of that is that adultery leads to divorce – in Jesus' time, not because the wife divorces the man, but because he has seen a woman he prefers so he divorces the wife. She has to remarry in order to protect her own security, and since the marriage bond was something unbreakable, she is made into an adulteress by remarrying. Perhaps this doesn't make much sense to us, although it is at the heart of Catholic thinking on divorce and remarriage. We might question whether a rigid view on marriage might be the cause of more distress if a woman is trapped in an unhappy and abusive relationship – surely there is forgiveness if she seeks divorce and remarries. But what Jesus is condemning is a lax view of marriage that sees divorce as an easy way out when things are less than perfect.

In verses 33-37 we see Jesus' fourth concern which is over the use of oaths. It was common in his time to swear an oath as a guarantee that your word could be relied upon. But sometimes oaths were taken as a way of evading a responsibility – e.g. Corban – the setting aside of responsibility for one's parents by promising one's wealth to God. It undermined the value of the ordinary spoken word. Also, an oath cannot be enforced – it doesn't change anything. Jesus says that oaths come from the evil one, and they presume to invade God's realm and bind God to a cause of action. He says that relationships need to be based on trust and integrity – and in the context of Matthew's gospel that would be particularly true in the community of the new church. This mustn't be seen as teaching that the swearing of an oath in a court of law is wrong – that is not the point. But it does warn us that using that word promise shouldn't be taken lightly – I promise you it won't snow on Tuesday – what do I know? I suppose politicians' promises come under the same condemnation. Jesus says speak honestly – say what you mean and mean what you say – that is all that is needed.

In all that Jesus has said about anger, lust, adultery and oath-making, he is concerned about relationships. What binds people together as opposed to what keeps them apart. And at the heart of it is what people choose to do. Our first reading makes it very clear about the commandments that Jesus has been talking about – that you can choose to keep them – or not. Acting faithfully to God's word is a matter of choice. Choosing God's way leads to life, anything else leads to death. God knows our hearts and minds – and he is not fooled – he knows what we really think. Verse 20 tells us that God has not commanded us to do wrong, nor has he given anyone permission to sin. It's all a matter of choice because he has given us free will.

We are not robots – when we are presented with the challenge of the gospel we can freely choose God or not God. I'm not talking about people who've never heard the gospel message. But those who have heard the message have to make that choice. When people choose life without God, however ethically and morally they try to live, if they are ignoring God the bible says they have chosen the way that leads to death, not eternal life as promised by Jesus. The only real sin is to deliberately and knowingly live your life as if there were no God. Living life God's way means that the choices we make are referred to him in prayer, that we allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit, and that we seek

February 12th 2017 – 3rd Sunday before Lent

to do God's will in all things. We may not always get it right but God knows our intentions and if our intention is to honour him then we are on the right path.

Paul tells us in his letter to the Christians in Philippi to 'Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.' It's part of that radical change of perspective that comes with becoming a Christian, as we allow the Holy Spirit to direct our thinking so that we see life from God's perspective rather than that of the world. Our hymns today reflect the idea that we should allow God to direct our thinking as well as our actions. Over time making the right choice becomes a matter of habit – a bit like learning to drive. When you are an experienced driver you don't have to think about when to change gear, when to brake – it just comes naturally. So it is with making the right choices in life if we are faithful in prayer, receptive to the leading of the Spirit as we seek God's will – choosing to act faithfully becomes a matter of habit. Sometimes there will be hard choices to make but if prayer is our habit then we know we have the resources to guide us as we choose.

So choose to keep the commandments in the way Jesus teaches, and choose to act faithfully in prayer and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and choose the way that leads to life. Thanks be to God.

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