

*3<sup>rd</sup> before Lent 2014*

As if the ten commandments were not hard enough, Jesus makes it a thousand times more difficult by saying that it is what goes on in our heads and hearts that matters. It isn't just what we do, but what we might like to do if we were not constrained by the boundaries of respectability.

Which of us here has not, at some time or another, got angry with someone close to us? This may have been expressed in an out and out row, or repressed and come out as a series of nags and grumbles, but the underlying anger was still there.

How many of us do not have someone in our family who is divorced? It isn't always easy to say it was entirely his or her fault. Something went wrong, there was unhappiness and it ended. It happens. And thankfully, some of those people have gone on to find new relationships that have brought them a real sense of joy and peace. Would we deny them that?

And how many of us have made rash promises that we haven't kept?

Is Jesus just setting us up for failure? Are we really doomed to hellfire? Should I be up here thumping the pulpit and saying 'repent, because you are all doomed'?

What about the God of love?

There is no doubt that this is radical teaching that Jesus was presenting. It was in stark contrast to the legalism of some of the Pharisees. His oratory skills are present in the formula that he uses: You have heard it said..... but I say to you....., each time challenging the listener to consider their motives. What make a person commit murder? Getting angry, or wanting to get even with someone. What makes someone commit adultery? Allowing their thoughts to wander into lustful fantasy.

If we read the whole of this passage from St Matthew's gospel, which really ends at verse 48, we find the words:

**Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**

Well, that is impossible.

But we can try.

All of this teaching is consistent with Jesus's constant challenge to hypocrisy. What we like to be seen as being should match what we really are, because God sees what we are inside. We can't hide anything from him.

But every one of us pretends. Indeed sometimes good manners demand that we pretend.

Oh there's Mrs so and so., can I avoid her..., no! 'How lovely to see you. How are you?.....'

Can we school our thoughts in such a way that we really are pleased to see Mrs so and so?

Or how many times have we said to someone 'I'll be in touch' and then forgotten all about it?

We are clearly not perfect. But this short passage from chapter 5 should not lead us to despair. It has to be read in the context of the whole gospel.

When you give alms, do it unostentatiously. When you pray, don't attempt to appear holy, do it in private. If you forgive other people, God will forgive you too. Don't judge other people, so that you may not be judged.

But most tellingly, who was healed? – a woman haemorrhaging, a leper, a paralysed man, the deaf and dumb, all considered in their time to be being punished by God and therefore not pure enough ever to enter the Temple. But Jesus healed them, made them clean.

Who did Jesus talk to, eat with? – tax collectors and publicans, he mixed with those who were not respectable and not considered good people.

Outrageously, or so it must have seemed at the time, he allowed a Syrophenian woman to get the better of him in an argument, so that he agreed to heal her daughter. And in his parables he became even more shocking, he talked about those who had kept the law and considered themselves to be good being turned away from heaven. He told them that the tax collectors and prostitutes would be going to heaven before them. But not because they were good! But because they knew what they were and didn't pretend to be otherwise.

If we were perfect we would love everyone, we would never get angry, never get bored, never say an unkind word. Our children would be brought up to behave impeccably, our marriages would be fulfilling and loving, we would never worry, the sky could be falling in and we would still be at peace.

The reality is different. We get cross, restless. Sometimes we are unkind. Sometimes family life is wonderful and sometimes it is awful. We worry about our children, our parents, and a host of other things, some important, some trivial.

We are not perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.

And that is normal. And it's OK. So long as we know it and would like to be better. So long as we are not pretending to other people, to ourselves or worse still to God that we are better than we are.

There are indeed harsh words in the gospel of Matthew, we can't escape that.

Listen to this from Chapter 23:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and all kinds of filth. So you also look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.'

But that needs to be balanced with the good news, the surprising and liberating good news.

It is in Matthew's gospel that we find the words:

Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.'

And 'the last will be first and the first will be last.'

And his final words to the disciples 'remember that I am with you always until the end of the age.'

Matthew's gospel does not offer us cheap grace. There is forgiveness always available, but only if we forgive others. There is reward in heaven, but only if we treat everyone as we would like to be treated. It is never too late to turn to Christ. He welcomes us as a shepherd welcomes the lost sheep.

We are approaching the season of Lent. By Ash Wednesday it will be too late to decide what we are going to do for Lent. We can give up wine or chocolate, we can take on extra duties, but whatever we do, let it be an aid to understanding our motives, our inner self, with the aim of giving that inner self a spring clean and spending time thinking what changes we would have to make if we really wanted to be perfect even as our Father in heaven is perfect. Amen.