

SERMON, ST JOHN'S EPIPHANY VII

Our Bishop last week spoke briefly about how the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel differs from Luke's corresponding Sermon on the Plain. He pointed to the manner in which Matthew "spiritualizes" Jesus' teaching by saying, for example, "Blessed are the poor **in Spirit**," while Luke is blunt in simply saying, "Blessed are the poor." To the actual **poor** the Kingdom of God belongs, not just those who are "spiritually" poor. Similarly, in Matthew Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled," while Luke bluntly states, "Blessed are you who are **hungry** now, for you will be filled." Matthew includes only "Beatitudes," that is "blessings," but Luke adds a series of rather alarming "woes" as well: "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep." Wow! Luke certainly doesn't pack the punch! There is no way we can hide behind nice spiritual interpretations of the hard and demanding words of Jesus in Luke. So, how do we reconcile these two diametrically opposing representations of the teachings of Jesus? Or, more pertinent to what I want to say, is it necessary to reconcile them at all? Some conservative Christian commentators insist that, in fact, the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain represent two separate teaching occasions in the ministry of Jesus and on each occasion he chose to look at his own teaching from different perspectives. With all due respect, I think this is nonsense! Clearly, what we see here are two different interpretations of the same teaching event and because they differ so significantly, they give us a wonderful opportunity to examine, not so much the precise words spoken by Jesus at a particular time and place, but how early observers and, indeed, later Christians understood and interpreted those words within their own contexts. In fact, such an exercise enables us to begin to understand how people in the early days of Christianity understood truth and how we ourselves may look at truth differently and interpret the Bible more accurately through the lens that early Christians used.

But first it's critical that I say something about the methodology of Jesus' teaching. He taught, like most Jewish rabbis of his time, not in allegories, but in parables. Allegorical teaching, whereby each element of a story must correspond to one aspect of reality in the world, was the Greek manner of teaching, and it was effective in conveying concrete and specific truths. The Jewish tradition of teaching in parables, however, was essentially **poetic**. When Jesus told a parable, for example, his intention was not to present only one interpretation of truth, but to allow the story to settle, like a seed in fertile ground, within the hearts of the hearers to bear fruit that is appropriate to the life of each person. No two people are the same, and Jesus in his divine wisdom understood that truth will effect people in very different ways, depending on their life situation. This was the brilliance of his teaching and it, of course, is an expression of his infinite love, for genuine "agape" sees and values others for who they are, respecting the beauty of every unique soul, not insisting that they conform to one model of human living. The result, of course, is that all genuine Christian teaching is poetic and, as you know (I hope!) poetry, like beauty, art, music and love cannot have only one interpretation.

It goes without saying, then, to apply a modern kind of pseudo-scientific rationalist approach to the interpretation of the Bible makes no sense. It must be interpreted poetically and in accordance with the understanding that for ancient people, and indeed all people until the last couple of hundred years, myth was truer than fact. Myth is essentially about **meaning**, which provides insight into living full and abundant lives, while scientific facts, though essential in sustaining a balanced and healthy life in the human community, have a different function. Religious truth is in the category of “myth,” because it is about meaning and the cultivation of the beauty, hope and love that makes life worth living at a level far above that of the mere facts of, for example, the design and manufacture of a micro-chip. We need to reject the understanding that “myth” means something that is “untrue” – on the contrary, our ancestors understood that myth as meaning was actually truer than fact!

This all means, of course, that the work of the Christian preacher is dangerous! I’m telling you now that you mustn’t listen to a preacher who insists that there is only one interpretation of the teachings of Jesus (including me!) anymore than there is only one interpretation to the poetry of Wordsworth, Cummings, or T.S. Eliot. This means that we must scrutinize carefully the difficult passages of Scripture, like the opposing words of Jesus in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount and Luke’s Sermon on the Plain. We must see the contradictions poetically and understand, as I’ve often said, that it is in these contradictions that we find God most poignantly. We must do all we can to understand the context in which both Matthew and Luke were writing, who they were and who their audience was. And then, we must listen to these oddly contradictory words parabolically, allow them to lodge in our own hearts and determine how they can have meaning for us in our own time, place and wildly differering life situations. Matthew was most likely a Jew writing for a Jewish Christian community, which is demonstrated by the Sermon on the Mount, representing a renewal, in theological terms, a “recapitulation” of the giving of the Torah on Mt Sinai to the Hebrew people. It is, however, surprising that his work “spiritualizes” the teachings of Jesus, when generally Jewish language is more concrete, while Greek is more philosophical. This, in itself, raises some interesting questions about his motivations in using this method and, in our own lives, why it begs the question of why it might be more appealing to internalize the teachings of Jesus. This tendency to avoid the hard challenges of Jesus in terms of actually **changing** the way we live our lives and treat other people is attractive to us. This explains, perhaps, why Matthew’s sermon has been so much more popular in Christian history than Luke’s. Who wants to be poor in fact, when you can get by just being “poor in spirit?”

Luke, on the other hand, appears to have been a Greek, with a Greek, gentile audience in mind. He dedicates his work, which includes the Book of Acts, to one “Theophilus,” who may be an illustrious Roman official, or the name, which means “lover of God”, could be simply a literary device. Regardless, it is surprising that Luke’s language is clear, plain and concrete in consistently attacking the rich and powerful throughout his Gospel. We may recall that his infancy narratives emphasize the poverty into which Jesus was born: God is incarnate among the poorest of the poor in a stable because there was not room for them in the inn. Mary’s song, the “Magnificat,” “brings down the powerful from their thrones, and lifts up the lowly; fills the hungry with good things, and sends the rich away empty.” At the Synagogue at Nazareth, only in Luke do we find Jesus preaching “good news to the poor.” All this is surprising, even shocking, if we consider that this Gospel was likely dedicated to a powerful Roman official! And here, in

this contradiction, we must examine what this means to us and how we can find God in the contradictions of our own lives.

And finally, the hardest part of all is looking at the verses in today's Gospel from the Sermon on the Plain, in which, by the way, Jesus is presented like a Greek philosopher teaching in the flat space of a Greek Agora, or marketplace. The hard words in this passage can only be understood within the context of the hard places in our own lives. We could say, as some scholars might, that Jesus is employing here what is called "Semitic hyperbole," an ancient Jewish teaching device whereby extreme exaggeration is used to get listeners to remember an important truth, which they might otherwise forget. A good example of this is the camel through the eye of a needle. But here, in this hard passage, I think we can't use hyperbole as a "cover." Without preconceptions, we need to examine carefully how these words apply to the unique situations of our own lives. How can we apply them parabolically, find meaning, unlock the poetry here that will enable us to live better, fully, richer, more loving lives in accordance with God who is perfect Love? I don't intend to give you an easy answer, because the answer can never be pat or superficial to the hard questions that lie at the root of your own rich and complex life. So, I'm sorry not to make it simple! I'm going to leave you with the following difficult questions and ask that you allow them, like fertile seeds, to lodge in your heart and grow to enable you truly to love God and your neighbor as yourself, as we are called by Jesus to do:

- What does loving **your** enemies actually look like?
- Is it remotely possible to bless those who curse you?
- Is it remotely possible, or even, right to pray for abusers?
- How about "turning the other cheek?"
- How about not withholding even your shirt when someone takes your coat?
- How about giving to everyone who begs from you?
- How about not asking for anything in return when someone takes from you?
- Is it enough to love those who love you, when it's hard enough to love them anyway?
- When you lend, do you expect something in return?
- Finally, what does it mean for you to be "merciful" as God is merciful?