

Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew.

Glory to you, O Lord.

I tell you unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven. You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times “you shall not murder “ and “whoever murders shall be liable to judgement”. But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister you will be liable to judgement and if you insult a brother or sister you will be liable to the council and if you say “you fool” you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to the court with him or your accuser may hand you over to the judge and the judge to the guard and you will be thrown in prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

This is the Gospel of the Lord

Praise to you O Christ

May I speak in the name of God, the Source of all being, the Eternal Word and Holy Spirit, Amen.

I did something the other day that I haven't done for the past 14 months. I went to the cinema! I saw the film Cruella. It's the back story of how Cruella de Ville came to be the 'Mrs Nasty' in the film The 101 Dalmatians. It stars Emma Stone as Cruella and Emma Thompson as the Baroness and both are deliciously outrageous villains whose rivalry and antics make the film hugely enjoyable to watch.

However, it set me thinking as to why it is that we are so attracted to these monstrous characters rather than the goody goody ones. After all, can you remember the names of the couple who saved the 101 dalmatians? And who would bother to make a film about their back story? Cruella on the other hand...

I think that part of the attraction of these characters, who are often depicted as huge narcissists, is their lack of shame. They love themselves, to the exclusion of all else, and they are entirely comfortable about saying to the world 'this is me, take it or leave it'.

And maybe, just maybe there are times in our lives or situations that we encounter where we would just love to be able to emulate them, notwithstanding our Christian principles, and say a big bog off to our adversaries.

But what's all this got to do with our Gospel passage today? As you know, the passage in Matthew finds us in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount. If we track back a few verses to the Beatitudes we find the words 'meek', 'lowly', 'poor', 'hungry', 'thirsty' and so on. I have to confess an emotional reaction to these words, which makes me want to run away from them. They are not how I want to be perceived by the world. I don't want to be a nicey nicey Christian with a fixed smile on my face who allows anyone and everyone to trample all over me.

Of course this emotional response to the words and characteristics expressed in the Beatitudes is not only illogical, but a complete misinterpretation of what Jesus meant. And we can see that not only as we reflect on the breadth of Jesus's teaching but also in the way in which He lived His life on earth. He wasn't afraid of speaking His mind or challenging authority. He was supremely brave as He went about His ministry not only in the places that He visited but also the people He engaged with, and His strength of character shines through even as He gave Himself up in his walk to Calvary. Not at all the image of the nicey nicey Christian that I mentioned before.

It is in the verses of our Gospel today that we see more of the practical outworking of what Jesus meant in the Beatitudes. There is hyperbole in Jesus's instructions, designed to forcibly drive home his points, but please note the following.

Firstly the pragmatism in his instructions especially in those in verses 25 to 26 "come quickly to terms with your accuser". We've all been in situations where issues have been left to stew, and therefore grown out of proportion. We may have been reluctant to face up to what we have done or we may not even have realised the extent of hurt we have caused to other people. Maybe we've been

too proud or caught up in ourselves. But Jesus is clear; deal with the issue as soon as possible, nip it in the bud. Simple, practical, direct, but also cognisant of our human trait to avoid or prevaricate over facing up to our errors and failings especially when they have impacted other people.

Secondly note how many of these instructions are set in the context of the wider community. The initial reference to the scribes and Pharisees, the impact of one's actions on our "brothers and sisters" and also the references to the framework within which earthly judgments are made. Given our northern European sensibilities, it's easy for us to fall into the trap that any wrongdoing on our part only affects the one who is hurt but I think Jesus is also implicitly drawing attention to the fact that broken relationships impact upon our wider community. That's something that we need to reflect upon carefully given our Parish Vision to be a community of mercy and kindness.

Finally, in terms of these reflections at least, there is Jesus's challenge to self centred thinking, most notably reflected in verses 23 and 24 "when you are offering a gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go first to be reconciled to your brother or sister and then come and offer your gift"

Jesus is very clever in his choice of scenario. Imagine I'm rushing to church to open up or because I'm serving in some way, as a reader, welcomer or even preacher. This is my gift of service and it's really important to me that I offer it. But important to whom else? The one I've hurt or am distanced from will not be able to 'receive' my gift until we are reconciled. Jesus's challenge is clear; mend your broken relationships first.

We see at the beginning of today's gospel that Jesus admired the rigour of the Pharisees and scribes in their observance of the law and ritual, just as we might admire those who are passionate and principled, and even admire some of the personality traits of the likes of Cruella. So it's not that He is seeking to diminish observance of the law or ritual, it's just that He is clear that the restoration of relationships is an absolute priority in the building of God's community on earth.

That restoration requires us not only to be open and honest with ourselves about our behaviour, but also for us to be able to step into the shoes of the person that

we've hurt and understand the impact of our actions from their perspective. It's the development of this skill which helps us to set the correct priorities in terms of our day to day actions.

That the restoration of relationships is a core priority of Jesus shouldn't come as any surprise. After all, as Jesus set His sights on Calvary wasn't His prime objective and calling to enable the most important relationship in our lives to be restored? For all of us to be able to walk with our holy, righteous and loving God without fear or shame.