



Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 20 February 2022

READINGS

Genesis 45:3-11, 15; Psalm 37:1-11, 40-41; 1 Corinthians 15:35-38,42-50; Luke 6:27-38

Sermon on the plain

This Sunday's Gospel reading follows from that difficult passage we heard last Sunday. Today's offers Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount, sometimes referred to as the sermon on the plain because Luke has Jesus teach on a "level place" (Luke 4:17). As Revd Sharmain highlighted last week, ostensibly in the preceding passage, Jesus is blessing the poor and cursing the rich, a difficult notion to take on board. This Sunday's Gospel reading is perhaps only marginally more palatable. It is possibly an excellent set text for ethics. Arguably Jesus espouses a staunch pacificism. So there are many tracks we could take with this passage. Was Jesus a pacifist? Many people think so and yet his disciples carried weapons, and used them and, according to John, Jesus made a whip and used it to drive out those engaged in commercial activity in the temple.

As Christians, we have a strange relationship with the Bible. It is undoubtedly a book we revere. We regard it as sacred, as being inspired by God. There are different views on inspiration, i.e. how the Bible came to be written. A more conservative stance sees every single word in the Bible as being transposed by God through human agents he appointed. This is problematic because it is very hard to understand and implement everything in the Bible in a literal way, partly because it belongs to a time and context very different from our own. Many practices which are prescribed and proscribed are irrelevant in our day in age.

While we can all acknowledge that many laws in the Old Testament are no longer relevant (such as the prohibition against wearing clothing made of more than one fabric) the Bible, as we know, was also a product of a patriarchal culture which condoned slavery. In Philemon, we read that the slave Onesimus ran away from his master, Philemon, to whom the letter is addressed, and Paul arranges for Onesimus to return to Philemon. Paul also strictly forbade women to speak publicly in churches. Again, we could say that these proscriptions reflect a culture and context radically different from our own.

There is another group of Scripture which I refer to as those we "conveniently ignore"—those which seem like they are meant to be observed, but we find them too difficult or impractical. A good example is Mark 10 where Jesus enjoins the young man to sell all he has and give the money to the poor. Straight after this Jesus says that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for people who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God. Rightly or wrongly, this passage, or its implementation, is ignored because none of us will ever sell what we own and give the proceeds to the poor. Another example is Matthew 5:27-32, which deals with intimate relations between men and women. Jesus says to look at a woman lustfully is to commit adultery and that divorcing one's wife and remarrying, except on the basis of the wife's infidelity, is also adultery.

This Sunday's Gospel reading also falls into this category, passages we sometimes prefer to ignore. There is a list of injunctions – Love your enemies. OK, this is a standard we can aspire to, a difficult one surely, but one we can aspire to. Then we should bless those who curse us. Perhaps they are getting a bit tougher, but a particularly helpful one to remember when navigating Joburg traffic. Turning the other cheek. Hmm, I'm sure that for the most part we are seldom in physical confrontations (this by the way is not applicable to situations of GBV) but if we are punched by someone, we should not engage them. God forbid, and God protect us from theft and robbery but if you happen to see someone stealing your car, you should allow them to do so. It's probably safer anyway. And then the one that is particularly relevant in a South African context, a country with the greatest income disparity in the world, we must give to everyone who begs from us.

So, perhaps this passage reflects standards we should aspire to. We probably know that we will never be able to fully implement them. Too difficult? Too impractical? Not relevant? What do we do with this passage, or passages like it? I wondered in preparing for today if there wasn't the remotest possibility that Jesus was being ironic. I mean, we have heard the beatitude 'blessed are the poor' so many times that its scandal is lost on us. As Revd Sharmain said last week, the poor were regarded as cursed in the context of ancient Judaism. They were cursed because they were poor or poor because they were cursed. Bottom line is they were both poor and cursed. So to come now and say, "Blessed are the poor" is either going to be laughed at, or dismissed out of hand.

But in terms of the import of this passage for ourselves, I think we are helped by the reading from Genesis where we see the very poignant reconciliation of Joseph with his brothers. You will recall how Joseph's brothers despised him, and I've always thought this was not without some justification because he comes across as an insufferable know-it-all. In any event the wicked treatment meted out to Joseph at the hands of his brothers is entirely undeserved on the part of Joseph. He escapes death only to be sold by his brothers into slavery.

What is almost worse than enduring the fate of being sold into slavery is living with the knowledge that one's very own brothers are responsible. Now picture yourself enduring the fate of a slave – the complete lack of freedom, menial tasks, hard labour, the reality of being somebody else's property, and all the while knowing that the reason for this sad state of affairs are one's very own flesh and blood. This is great opportunity, to seethe and brood, to meditate on revenge, to allow anger and bitterness a firm rooting in one's heart, indeed to nourish that anger and bitterness with thoughts of darkness. That's probably what I would do.

Possibly, why this passage from Luke 6 appears to be not only very impractical, but virtually impossible to implement, is, I suspect, that only people who are truly free can live by these standards. And by free I mean, free of all hatred, animosity, bitterness, unforgiveness, free of any sense of entitlement, free of feeling like the world owes you something. Only people who are free of these things can implement this. Joseph, as is evidenced in the reconciliation he undertakes with his brothers, is one such person. Jesus, I think, was one such person. Our former president, Ntate Madiba, was one such person. The late Archbishop Emeritus was one such person. And when this teaching says, "Your reward will be great," I believe this is true, for we will have gained true freedom, true peace and contentment. It is not merely for the sake of our enemy that we are called to love them, but our own. For when we harbour animosity and resentment we grant our enemies power over us and our souls becomes enslaved to this.