

Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 16 February 2014 (Year A)
Deut.30.15-20; Ps.119.1-8; I Cor.3.1-9; Matt.5.21-37

As you stand in the supermarket queue and look at what the people around you have in their baskets, do you find yourself sometimes passing judgment on them? I'm afraid I can't stop myself, especially if they're loaded with crisps and beer and sweets and biscuits, and I think to myself, you really ought to change your diet; conveniently forgetting that I have been known to indulge in them myself. Some of us were discussing the other Sunday how easy it is to jump to conclusions and be judgmental about other people and their habits. I am a great and notorious sinner in this respect. You should hear me when I'm in full flow (never on a Sunday, of course). Do you ever get angry or call people fools? I do; and worse things than fools, and even if that happens rarely, I think it often enough. Does that mean, as Jesus suggests, that I will find myself in court or be liable to the fires of hell (the Greek term is Gehenna, a valley where the rubbish of Jerusalem was burnt). Has my right eye or hand never led me astray? Then why have I still got them both? According to the teaching of Jesus, I am in some trouble.

And here's another thing. Do you think of yourself as a Christian first and then as belonging to a particular denomination, or is it the other way round? I don't mean in theory, I mean in the way you actually think. If, like me, you were raised in one particular branch of the Church and have never left it, it can be quite hard to comprehend why other people insist, for example, on elaborate rituals with candles and incense, or on waving their hands in the air and shouting out 'Praise the Lord!' or some other pious ejaculation during prayers and sermons. Because it's alien to your experience it puts you off and because it puts you off you begin to wonder how it can turn anyone else on and whether there isn't something wrong with them. And there we go being judgemental again. It makes us feel better and it keeps them in their proper place, as poor, misguided creatures. If Paul is right, the denominational labels we wear can cause arguments, dissensions and divisions in the one body of Christ; which is exactly where we are, for all our ecumenical endeavours.

These matters, important as they are, pale into insignificance in comparison with what has been happening in the last few days in the Central African Republic. Gangs of so-called Christian militia have been lynching their Muslim neighbours as revenge for similar atrocities committed against them (contrast this with Father Xavier, a priest in the capital city, who has opened his church as a sanctuary for Muslims fleeing the violence). I find it impossible to square the notion of Christian militia – though we often enough refer to Muslim terrorists - with the words of the one who commands us to love our enemies and do good to those who persecute us. Yet am I in any position to judge, even though I can't see how revenge can ever be a Christian virtue.

Sometimes we must take a stand against clear and present evil, but it's so easy from a safe distance, when the truth is that life deals some very cruel cards to people and the black-and-white answers we all crave turn to not even fifty but to infinite shades of grey, even when it comes to murder. A while back I watched *Defiance*, a film about the Bielski partisans, a group of Jews in Belarus (White Russia) who fled into the forests and engaged in acts of sabotage and resistance, including murder, against the Nazi persecutors and their collaborators. What would you or I have done in the circumstances? We can't possibly know. I couldn't help but admire their refusal to be victims and their courage in facing up to such terror against all the odds, and I was moved to learn that their stand had ensured the survival of more than a thousand Jews who would otherwise have themselves been murdered. It comes to a head when we ask whether those Germans who tried to blow up Hitler (and failed) were justified in taking such action in the name of Christianity. It is true that by the Middle Ages St Thomas Aquinas would argue that kings must govern by consent, and that a tyrant could properly be removed by his people, even by violent means. But the teaching of Jesus does not seem to envisage such things; and it gets the harder when he appears to tell us that if we are angry with or insult a brother or sister we share in the same kind of guilt as the murderer, and if we have lustful thoughts about someone we are as good (or bad) as adulterers. Surely there has to be a moral difference between thinking something and acting on it; or between losing our rag and killing someone.

The dilemma I was feeling about the Sermon on the Mount came home to me when I happened to look at our Wessex Synod's 'Sharing the Vision' document for January

– not something I normally spend much time perusing. It contained extracts from a letter entitled ‘An astonishing account of life in Beirut from St Andrew’s United Reformed Church, Walton-on-Thames’. Here’s one of them: ‘I watch many of my friends become obsessed with the war [in Syria], stuck in a never-ending spiral of political rhetoric, vitriolic talk, accusations, hatred boiling up from inside everyone. Hopelessness being the plate of the day, served up lukewarm with the latest death toll. And who am I to judge? How can I tell my friend who had his 12-year-old cousin tortured not to hold on to bitterness? Parties in Beirut turn to street-fights of people yelling about whose “side” you should be on, kicks, curses and fists being thrown, as if that will erase the pain and the grief and the suffering. It won’t bring back the dead, that’s for sure. But maybe that’s all people have left.’

Nearly all my life I’ve been used to people treating the teaching of Jesus in the sermon on the Mount as weak and passive and the longer I have lived the more I have come to see that this is both foolish and wrong. It might be so if the point was to take it all literally, but I’m equally sure that it’s not a blueprint for exactly how to behave in any given circumstance. Jesus wants us to question why we live under the delusion that if we’re not exactly perfect we are at least much better than that lot over there, and to show us the damage that does to us and to them. The passage we heard today is fundamentally about changing our attitudes towards other people, and in particular, about being honest with ourselves, so that we stop playing the easy game of ignoring our own faults while being all too aware of the faults of others. The method Jesus uses is a traditional Jewish one: shock and surprise, intended to make us think. His teaching is all about how the process of transformation can begin. Turning the other cheek, for example, is meant to make us think about how cycles of revenge and retaliation can be broken; how to create a space in which the perpetrator can ask whether there may not be a better way. Walking the extra mile when a Roman soldier forces you into carrying his heavy bags encapsulates the difference between doing an unwelcome task grudgingly, which stores up more resentment, or doing it in a spirit of joy, which sets the soul free: as George Herbert so beautifully put it, ‘who sweeps a room, as for thy sake, makes that and th’action fine’. Cutting off your right hand and tearing out your right eye because they lead you astray is not a biblical warrant for

extreme self-harming, but an extraordinarily vivid way of helping us to understand that the longings and desires we all have can cause pain and distress to others, and to attend, as he so memorably said, first to the great big plank in our own eye rather than being obsessed by the speck of dust in someone else's.

Christians have spent the best part of two thousand years arguing about doctrine and killing and maiming one another when they encountered fundamental disagreements. Even now, we spend a lot of time in the world of ideas, rather than trying to engage with what it means when the Word made flesh comes to dwell among us. We would do well to spend more time immersing ourselves in the teaching of Jesus and trying to work out its practical consequences for our own lives and times. When society's problems are being discussed, human beings have a terrible tendency to pick on some unfortunate group of people as responsible for them and heap on them the blame. At its very worst this leads to genocide. It's almost as if we need to have an enemy against whom we can measure ourselves so that we can see ourselves in a favourable light. It is true that the levels of immigration we have seen since the Second World War have brought serious problems in their wake, but also great opportunities. In many ways we have become a more tolerant and accepting society, and found much to celebrate in our diversity. The current debate about immigration is understandable, but a black-and-white approach is not the answer. If we simply lump together immigrants as the cause of all society's ills and do not recognise their positive contributions we are falling into the very trap Jesus is trying to pull us out of in his teaching. If we simply repeat the redtop mantras about people of benefits as idle and undeserving and consign them all, without distinction, to the same rubbish heap, then we are aligning ourselves with everything that diminishes people and treats them as beneath contempt; with the attitudes that have wrought so much pain and suffering in generations past.

So we need the salutary shock that Jesus gives us. We need to be reminded that the attitudes which feed on our insecurity and nourish our prejudices belong to the old way of destruction and death. We need to be saved from ourselves at our worst so that our true, God-given humanity can emerge out of the shadows. It's hard work. But it begins not when we find a solution but when we recognise that there is a problem; and

it continues each time we choose life over death. I can't tell you how that should play out in Syria or the Central African Republic, or at any moment when our basest instincts run riot; but I can tell you that if you want to live by the Sermon on the Mount the place to begin is with yourself, and the way to begin is to let the light of the Saviour shine into those dark places we all have and from which we spend half our lives running because they scare us. There is no prescriptive pattern all of us must follow. Each of us is different, and there are as many ways to God and as many ways of learning the way of Christ as there are individuals. We have our own anxieties, fears and hang-ups which condition our attitudes to others. They need to be named and recognised so that the process of healing them can begin. You may wonder how that can be. One of the great arguments which caused so much bloodshed in the past was over the question of what makes us acceptable in the sight of God: our faith, or our works. Opposite sides characteristically lampooned each other's views. Catholics said that if all you needed was faith, then you could believe and carry on behaving as selfishly and as hurtfully as before. Protestants said that our good works could not justify us in the eyes of God because we cannot bribe our way into salvation. Both sides were right and both were wrong. The truth is a more dynamic one: that as we actively allow our lives to be influenced by the way of Jesus, so divine grace comes to transform them. We are given more than we give. There is always a mutual relationship between faith and works, by which the grace of God at work in unseen ways in our lives calls forth from us more works of love more joyfully done than we had ever imagined ourselves capable of.

I leave you with two thoughts from St John of the Cross, a man who suffered greatly at the hands of his fellow-Christians, writing towards the end of the sixteenth century. The first is a gentle warning which we should take to heart: 'I see that Christ is little known by those who think themselves his friends.' The second is entirely in accordance with the Sermon on the Mount: 'Love greatly those who speak against you and do not love you, because in this way love will come to birth in a heart that has none.'