

**SUNDAY - 6<sup>th</sup> February, 2011 Year A**

**Responsibility: Canon Barlow Matthew 5**

The Gospel for today clearly sets out what is the basic role of the Church in society today - a role which it could fairly be said too many of us overlook or complicate: "You are the salt of the earth You are the light of the world." (Matt.5:13-14) Jesus had left the crowds and gone up the mountain with His disciples, and He sat down to teach them. Even though this so-called Sermon on the Mount is probably a collection of the Sayings of Jesus rather than a non-stop address, the point is clear: Jesus was directly addressing His followers, His disciples, the Church.

We may justifiably doubt that He was laying out a kind of blue print for all and sundry to live the "Good Life." People tend to speak as if this was the case, and certainly it is the teaching which leads to living a proper way of life. But surely it is for Christians - those who are seeking to follow Christ. Those who are not followers of Christ must find it impossibly idealistic and impractical. And in *fact* it is not easy even for devout Christians to adhere to every injunction contained in those three chapters of St.Matthew's Gospel which set out the Sermon on the Mount.

Just take one example: how difficult it would be to turn the other cheek to receive a wallop after already receiving one on the first! You might be familiar with the painting by Holman Hunt called "The Light of the World" - it is fairly frequently reproduced in religious publications. The original is in St. Paul's Cathedral, London. This picture depicts Christ wearing a crown of thorns, clad in a white robe, and carrying a lantern. The lantern lights up the immediate area, while the background is shadowy and dark. He is knocking at a door. This door represents the hearts of men and women, and it has no door-knob - it can only be opened from within. The contrast between darkness and light is a favourite topic of the New Testament - used to represent the conversion of a person to Christianity as a movement out of darkness into light. Or as Holman Hunt saw it, accepting and letting in the light of Christ into our hearts. Part of the symbolism of the two altar candles lies in this idea of Christ the Light of the world. They are to remind us of Christ the Light - true God and true Man.

Many churches make effective use of this symbolism in the Easter ceremonies before the First Eucharist on Easter Eve. Traditionally there are no candles on Good Friday, to indicate that the Light of the World was extinguished and it seemed on that day that the powers of darkness had overcome it. But as Christ overcame death and rose triumphant, so the Pascal Candle is lit and carried in procession into the darkened church, and from it is lit all the others plus those held by members of the congregation. This is very effective and powerful symbolism.

In Baptism Services that same symbolism is taken up as the priest gives to the candidate or an infant's parent or godparent a lighted candle, saying: "God has called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Shine as a light in the world to the glory of God the Father.

We heard in today's Gospel that our Lord said: "Let your light so shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." Yet some verses on in this same Sermon on the Mount - verse 1 in chapter 6 - we read: "Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them." This seems to be contradictory but of course it is not. The reason for let

your light shine before people is that seeing your good works they may praise your Father in heaven. This is different from doing good works to be seen by people. It all depends upon who you are glorifying – yourself or your Heavenly Father.

The image of light is linked with an equally striking one: "You are the salt of the earth." The Church, made up of individual men and women just like us, is to be the salt of society. Dieticians argue about the need for, and the appropriate quantity of salt in our diet. But how flat and dull and uninteresting chips are, without a good dash of salt - and others dishes too. It is consoling to remember when we worry about the apparently small number of Christians compared with the number of the uncaring, that it doesn't take much salt to affect and flavour a whole meal. You can't take that metaphor too far though, because there never can be too many Christians in the world, but there can be too much salt on your chips! The influence of the Christian minority is often overlooked even by Christians themselves: we must never be afraid to speak out for Christian principles when society seems intent on pursuing some less than proper action.

As we only notice the need for salt in our food when it is not there; as we notice the lack of light when we flip the switch and nothing happens, so we tend to take for granted God's provision for our needs, only noticing it in a season of excessive drought or rain. The prophets of old used those times to berate the people for their sinful ways, claiming that calamities were sent by God as punishment. Of course we know better, don't we? Or we think we do because records show that such weather patterns have happened before and are only to be expected. If you live in an earthquake belt you can expect earthquakes and tidal waves as a matter of course.

If you try to farm outside Goyder's Line you can expect to have crop failures and see your topsoil blow away from time to time. So we tend to take God's providence for granted, pausing perhaps once a year at a Harvest Thanksgiving Service - if we remember to have one - to be reminded that we are indeed dependent upon the mercy of God. His people of old firmly believed that He destroyed those with whom He was not well pleased. And although this was a rather simplistic belief, we need to be reminded when things go wrong in our lives, that perhaps that light which was kindled in us has grown dim. Perhaps the salt has lost its savour and is in danger of being thrown out. And we should look again at the quality of our lives, of our worship, of our service as children of our Heavenly Father. "Your light must shine in the sight of men, so that seeing your good works, they may give the praise to your Father in heaven," says the Jerusalem Bible version of this passage. There is no greater witness to the truth of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and to the power of the Holy Spirit, than men and women actually living their lives according to it. The good works we do should point away from ourselves to the grace of God - the Church must show the reality and the relevance of Christ's coming into His world, and the availability of salvation and peace to all who turn and follow Him. **AMEN**

**SUNDAY 13th FEBRUARY - Year A 2011**

**Responsibility: Canon Barlow**

**[Based on the Gospel for today viz. Matthew 5:21-37]**

"So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well being." (Deut.12 & 13)

The opening words of today's first Reading - just two verses of a great outpouring by Moses, occupying several chapters of the Book Deuteronomy, in which Moses lays down in the name of God the requirement

for the Children of Israel to be faithful people of God. These two verses are the nub of the whole - the rest is a spelling-out of what these mean in practice. They sound rather like the first of our Lord's Two Great Commandments, don't they? "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." And in fact Jesus was quoting from this same book, Deuteronomy. After all, what we call the Old testament was our Lord's Bible, and He knew it very well indeed, and quoted from it frequently, as well as fulfilling so many of its prophecies.

Just before the extract appointed for today's Gospel, in this same chapter 5, Jesus is recorded as saying: "Think not that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets. I have come, not to abolish them, but to fulfil them." (v.17) And then comes that warning about dodging and diluting the commandments of the Law and the Prophets: "Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven." It places a great strain and responsibility upon the Church as it tries to interpret and teach and apply God's laws in a manner which is also in accord with our more developed understanding and knowledge of God's merciful and forgiving nature - knowledge which was not known by many in pre-Christian times. There was no mercy or forgiveness, for instance, shown by the Jewish churchmen who were set to stone to death the woman taken in adultery: a crime punishable by stoning according to the Law stated in the Book Leviticus, chapter 20, verse 10. They were quite within their rights. Jesus diffused the issue by challenging any person without sin to throw the first rock - and of course there was no-one. Yet Jesus had said that He had come to fulfil the Law, and warned most solemnly against watering them down. The story is in St. John's Gospel, chapter 8. We need to read carefully, and understand just what Jesus was doing and saying. He was not condoning adultery, nor excusing it. The sin was still a sin. In saving the woman from a merciless and cruel punishment by sanctimonious men, He commanded the sinner to sin no more. Far from condoning adultery or excusing it, Jesus went further than the old Seventh Commandment with its blunt: "Thou shalt not commit adultery", by declaring: "I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

Similarly with the sin of murder: "I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment." Some

versions say: "Without cause." The point is that the same impulse which leads to us losing our tempers leads us to even greater violence if it is not checked. The third example in today's Gospel where our Lord is spelling out the fulfilling of the Law and the Prophets causes great concern about the way the Church handles the marriage of people when one or other has had a previous marriage fail. "I say to you," said Jesus, "that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." The reverse is also surely the same situation. The Church tries to balance this blunt statement with the knowledge of the forgiving, understanding love of Jesus. Regulations governing the marriage of divorced people require that the new partner was not involved in the breakdown of the first marriage, and that the subsequent marriage is likely to be for the well-being, and particularly the spiritual wellbeing of the couple. The interests of any young children concerned must also be considered. Approval for such a marriage to take place in an Anglican Church by an Anglican priest must be given by the Bishop.

The Church tries to interpret and apply God's laws in a way which is in accordance with our knowledge of God's mercy and forgiveness. The fact that there are so few one-eyed or one-handed Christians about is not because so few have sinned, but rather because we prefer to take a: allegorical our Lord's words: "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell."

We must read carefully and understand just what it was that Jesus was saying. His purpose in talking like this was to make it perfectly clear that the new life was to be lived, not as a relationship with God governed by rules and commandments and taboos and prohibitions, but in a relationship of love and fellowship with the Living God, and with one's fellow human beings. Ideally this relationship should flow freely from a desire to worship God and to serve others.

This would mean utter selflessness, and utter concern for others and for their welfare. Unfortunately we are still very sinful creatures and we need laws and rules to make us respect the rights of others.

This little story underlines the misunderstanding that right-eousness can be obtained by obedience to law: A missionary in a wild and remote part of Africa was trying to convert an old cannibal chief. The chief was very old and the missionary was very Old Testament minded. "Have I got it right", the old chief said at last. "You tell me that I must not take my neighbour's wife." "That's right," said the missionary. "Nor his ivory or his oxen?" "Quite right." "Or ambush him on the trail and kill him?" "Absolutely right." "Then", said the chief, "I will be a first class Christian, because I am too old to do any of these things!"

How many people think of Christianity as something old, sapless, stale, joyless, dead? How many think of religion as the enemy of fun and life and pleasure, an enemy of all natural love and delight? How many of us have reduced the Good News of Jesus Christ to a list of dreary Thou-shalt-nots, and tried to force it over our natural desire to enjoy life? We are in danger of forgetting that God is not only a comfort in time of trouble, but that He is also the source of all pure joy, pleasure, fun, laughter, and that we are meant to enjoy the life which stems from Him. And "joy" comes second on St. Paul's list of the fruits of the Spirit: "Love, joy, peace ....", the discernable results of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us.

"I tell you," said Jesus, "unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." The Scribes and the Pharisees were most strict in their literal observance of the Commandments and the Law. But their obedience was carried out with not much sincerity of heart, let alone love for others. They preferred the praise and the admiration of other people. Living as Christians requires us to go much further, to be concerned not only about our outward behaviour - important though that is - but also about the inner motives which lie behind our behaviour. We obey God's commandments to the best of our ability out of our love for Him, not for fear of punishment or looking for the praise of other but in response to His love poured out upon us.

" To go back to the Book Deuteronomy where we began, with that incredible statement that "Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the Lord your God, the earth with all that is within it, yet the Lord set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today."

How other can we respond than by faithfully striving to do His will as His obedient sons and daughters?

**AMEN**

**SUNDAY 20<sup>th</sup> FEBRUARY, YEAR A 2011**

**Responsibility: Canon Barlow**

**Based on the Gospel for today viz. Matthew 5 vv.338-48**

In today's Gospel passage, Matthew records Jesus' reinterpretation of the old Law, set down for the Hebrews many years before and part of which we heard in the Old Testament reading. The Book Leviticus, the third in the Bible and following Genesis and Exodus, is very heavy and severe on the Law which the author saw as coming directly from God to Moses and hence to the people. "Be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy." "Love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord."

Some of the injunctions were picked up and used by Jesus in His teaching, as in the Sermon on the Mount. "Do not steal; do not lie; do not deceive one another; and love your neighbour as yourself." But Jesus chose to ignore many of the extreme and cruel punishments for those who violated the Law, some of which required death by stoning or by burning. "You have heard that it was said, Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth" said Jesus, "but I tell you, do not resist an evil person. Turn the other cheek." By no means an easy thing to do, just to stand there without retaliating, when our instinct is to hit back. But Jesus did it. He even told Peter to put up his sword, when Peter was going to defend his Master from arrest and all that followed.

It is a great pity that the word "child" has so few other words to rhyme with it appropriately for a hymn. Otherwise we might have been spared the unfortunate couplet that hundreds and hundreds of people have learned in their childhood: "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon a little child." It also occurs in one of the Christmas hymns perhaps we sang not so long ago: "Christian children all must be mild, obedient, good as He" (although that verse has been dropped in the hymn book "Together in Song.")

Of all the epithets that could be applied to Jesus, "mild" seems one of the least appropriate. For what does "meek and mild" conjure up in our minds? Surely someone who wouldn't say "boo" to the proverbial goose! Someone who would let sleeping dogs lie, and avoid trouble wherever possible; someone who is a bit of a nonentity, both uninspired and uninspiring.

"Mild" is a strange word to use to describe a man who did not hesitate to challenge and expose the hypocrisies of the religious people of His day. A man who had such personality that He walked through a murderous crowd; a man so far from being a nonentity that he was regarded by the authorities as a public danger; a man who could be moved to violent anger by the exploitation of the "haves" over the "have nots", or by the smug complacent religious leaders; a man of such courage that He deliberately walked to what He knew would mean death, in spite of the pleas of His well-meaning friends. Mild! What a word to use for a personality whose challenge and attractiveness have still the same pull after 20 centuries. We might call Him "meek", in the sense of being selfless and humble and totally devoted to what He considered right whatever the personal cost. But not "mild".

Yet it is this fatal combination of "meek and mild" which has been so often, and still is applied to Jesus, that we can hardly be surprised if children come to feel they've outgrown "Gentle Jesus" and find their heroes elsewhere, and which appear to be more dynamic and exciting. The soft and sentimental impression of Jesus having been made, (and supported alas by sugary hymns and twee religious pictures) the harm is not over when the adolescent rejects the soft and childish conception. There will probably linger at the back of such a person's mind an idea that Christ and the Christian religion is a soft and sentimental thing which has nothing to do with the "real" world. There is no doubt that this "inadequate god", the mild, weak, soft, and sentimental image still exists in many adult minds. Indeed the very word "Jesus" conjures up to many people a certain embarrassing sweet tenderness (except when used as a swearword) which could easily be put in its proper place by an intelligent reading of the Gospels.

The danger of the "meek and mild" idea is two-fold. First, because Christians believe that the character of Christ is an accurate depiction of Almighty God focussed in time and space, it is likely to lead to a conception of God which is woolly and sentimental. It is not possible for a mature adult to worship a god who he sees as less mature than he is. The second danger is that since it is a basic belief for Christians that God is Love, it follows that the wonder of the love of God for all humanity would become debased and cheapened by a god who is meek and mild., and impossible to imagine as "maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen". This "meek and mild" conception of God should be readily seen through. Yet it is operating beneath the conscious level of many Christian people, and no doubt deters many others who might feel the urge to worship yet cannot bring themselves to do so. How can they worship a god who it seems to them, because of a sentimental "religious" upbringing, is insipid and powerless. Many non-Christian see Church people as unreal or even hypocrites, as they worship and a trying to walk in Christ's Way, because the non-religious still see worshippers in the light of their own misunderstanding of the true nature of Christ the Light of the world and Redeemer of all mankind. There is an off-shoot of the erroneous impression of the character of the Son of God. It is the sentimental idea of "saintliness".

We hear or we read, of someone who was "a real saint: he never saw any harm in anyone and never spoke a word against anyone all his life If this is really Christian saintliness, then Jesus Christ was no saint! It is true that He taught men not to sit in judgement upon another, but He never suggested that they should turn a blind eye to evil, or pretend that other people were faultless. He Himself indulged in no rose-tinted visions of human nature. As St. John put it: "He knew what was in man." (John 2:25). Nor can we imagine Him using vaguely sentimental language. To speak the truth was obviously to Him more important than to make His hearers feel comfortable, and cosy, though His genuine love for people gave Him tact, wisdom, and sympathy.

Jesus was Love in action, displaying the Creator's love for His often-erring children. But Jesus was certainly not meek and mild.

**AMEN**

## **SUNDAY 27th FEBRUARY YEAR A 2011**

### **Responsibility Canon B**

#### **(Based of the Gospel for today viz. Matthew 6:22-34)**

In the film "Life of Brian", Brian is being crucified along with many others. He has been mistakenly identified as the Messiah, although his mother says: "He is just a naughty boy." He leads the others on their crosses in the song: "Always look on the bright side of life." It would be a difficult thing to do, under the circumstances.

Yet that is pretty much what Jesus was urging us to do, in today's Gospel passage. "Don't worry! God's got it all under control." But we do worry. Jesus was not urging us to be improvident, although at first glance it seems so. Of course we have to pay our way, our taxes, our rent or mortgage, our cost of living bills. The facile advice to always look on the bright side of life is of little help. But problems are not solved by lying awake at night, tossing and turning and fretting. Besides, a good night's sleep helps one's concentration next day as we face up to the problems.

In this same 6th chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel, we have Jesus teaching the disciples to pray, and in particular the so-called Lord's Prayer. In it we pray "Give us today our daily bread" meaning of course adequate provision for our bodily nourishment. How fortunate we are to have an excess of food and drink. Others in this world have scarcely enough. The reasons behind that lack are many and complex and not readily solved, except that it means that we who have so much must share with those who have so little.

And were the "hippies" of a couple of decades ago, who didn't seem to care about what they wore right in their choice of clothing and life style? I think not, because their aim was to be different and to shock. It became a cult. There is nothing wrong with our selecting clothes to look nice in - it only goes against Jesus' teaching when it takes us over and becomes an end in itself.

I would instance the Melbourne Cup Carnival, and fashion parades. "So do not worry" said Jesus, "saying What shall we eat, or what shall we drink, or what shall we wear." It all comes down to a matter of faith, of trust in God. The following poem was written by Minnie Louise Hoskins, verse one of which was quoted by King George VI in his Christmas broadcast of 1939 when the world was under the shadow of World War I:

I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: "Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown." And he replied, "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way So I went forth and finding the hand of God, trod gladly into the night. And He led me towards the hill and the breaking of day in the lone East. So heart be still: What need our little life Our human life to know, If God hath comprehension? In all the dizzy strife Of things both high and low, God hideth His intention. God knows. His will is best. The stretch of years Which wind ahead, so dim To our imperfect vision, Are clear to God. Our fears Are premature: in Him

All time hath full provision. Then rest: until God moves to lift the veil  
From our impatient eyes.  
When, as the sweeter features Of life's stern face we hail, Fair beyond all surmise  
God's thought  
around His creatures Our mind shall fill.

This poem is magnifying in a confident and positive way what Matthew quotes Jesus as saying: "Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness" - that is, Put your hand into the hand of God. "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself." So heart be still - what need our little life, human life to know, if God hath comprehension?

Matthew quotes Jesus questioning another of our automatic, unthinking assumptions. We all plan for the future. We have to. yet here it is asserted by Jesus Himself that we must live from one day to the next in complete submission to the will of God, and complete trust in His sustaining providence. St. James, in his Epistle to the Church in general, has a strong word to say on this topic: "Now listen, you who say 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.'" Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, If it is the Lord's will we will live and do this and that." (4:13-15)

Plan we must, if we are to live normal, rational lives. The housewife must plan ahead to ensure she has adequate provisions on hand; Christmas and birthday presents have to be bought well in advance of the occasion; airline and rail tickets cannot be left to be bought at the last minute. Meetings and functions have to be planned in advance so as not to coincide with other commitments. We are forced to keep an appointments diary, or maybe make notes on a calendar. We have to know well in advance where we are supposed to be and when and what may be required of us. Otherwise life gets out of control. It is not reasonable to think that we should wake up in the morning and say: "Now I wonder what God wants me to do today?" God gave us an intellect and a brain to work these things out for ourselves.

No, the Gospel message is to remind us that it is God who is in control, and that we should seek His guidance and strength, making our decisions as faithful disciples. Not to fret, not to panic, take one step at a time. It is no reassurance to say: "Don't worry, it might never happen." It might! Far better to take Jesus at His word: "Seek first the Kingdom of Heaven, and all these things will be given to you as well"- calmness, stability, love, joy, peace, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven. **AMEN**