

## General Synod 2010

Closing Sermon, 23 September, 2010.

Delivered at the Melbourne Grammar School by the Primate.

Texts:

Psalms 54; 55.1-12

Joel 1.1-14

Matthew 7.24 – 8.4 House built on the rock

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Jesus said, 'Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ... And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand.'

The words in question refer to the famous 'Sermon on the Mount' that runs through chapters 5, 6 and 7 of Matthew. The sermon has been called 'winged words'. The sermon has been seen as 'a canon within the canon.' They are powerfully representative of the whole faith.

But for all that, it is not without its difficulties. Some of these words could easily be responsible for F. F. Bruce, I think it was, saying that the bible is a most difficult book not because of the bits I can't understand, but because of the bits I can.

The sermon teaches us, for example –

'If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out' (5.29).

'Do not swear at all' (5.34) in contrast to Article 39 of our Articles of Religion which has it '... that Christian Religion doth not prohibit, but that a man may swear when the Magistrate requireth ...'

The sermon tells us 'not [to] resist one who is evil' (5.39) which seems to undermine the very basis of decent society.

You are to 'give to him who begs from you' (5.42) but, as Luther construed it, not necessarily exactly what he asks for!

'You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (5.48).

You are not to be angry; show not even a desire to retaliate; feel no hatred; be entirely and wholly pure.

'Hear these words and do them,' says Jesus. Simple. Straightforward. Unqualified. Clear.

But they've given rise to perhaps more exegetical gymnastics down the ages than any other passage in scripture.

The medieval church saw the sermon as a counsel of perfection which it expected only monastics to observe who were living outside the real world. The implication being that those who had to deal with the realities of day to day life couldn't possibly live by such a code and survive.

The Reformation dispensed with this double standard and regarded the sermon as setting down uncompromising norms for all Christian people, who would of course fall short of such impossible expectations and fall back on the grace of justification by faith.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars argued that Jesus wasn't setting down rules for behaviour, but rather exposing inner principles and attitudes, fundamental inward dispositions. So the sermon was about renewal of the inner life rather than ethics: who we should be rather than what we need to do.

I'm more convinced by Tom Wright's circumvention of these gymnastics with a decent dose of historical context. The sermon, he says, is a challenge to Israel to be truly Israel: to be true to her identity and vocation as the people of God.

Israel longed for God's kingdom to come and was ready to struggle and fight for it. Israel hoped she would be vindicated in a national victory, her enemies, including her occupiers, would be overthrown, the land returned, and she would see God.

But in Jesus' view Israel was on the wrong track. As the beatitudes set out, the kingdom belongs to the poor in spirit and will be inherited by way of meekness, not through physical battles against enemies; not through anger where justice means nothing more than vengeance. Humility and gentleness will inherit the kingdom, says Jesus. Mercy is for the merciful, not the vengeful; for the peacemakers and the pure of heart.

First and foremost, the beatitudes call Israel to discover her true vocation by following the way Jesus sets out, rather than by aligning herself with other would-be leaders.

Israel was meant to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, but had lost her saltiness and hidden her light from the nations round about. Jesus calls Israel to be her true self, by following his agenda, rather than the path she was on.

‘You have heard that it was said ... but I say to you ...’ The great antitheses are a kind of radicalization of the Torah, the old law, going to the heart of it. Israel is not going to be her true self by multiplying and refining rules to be followed. She will only discover her true identity by integrating heart and action in a single loyalty. That basic idea still finds expression in our own call to prayer in the daily office in AAPB: ‘Let us pray with one heart and mind.’

Such an integration, such a discovery, Jesus is saying, will produce a very different way of being Israel.

According to this way, an accused person will reconcile with an accuser on the way to court; alienated friends will reconcile on the way to the Temple.

If you are commandeered by a Roman soldier to carry his pack for a mile, you will be surprisingly generous rather than complain and retaliate. The state’s enemies are not necessarily enemies of God and Israel must learn to love them and to pray for them if she is truly to be like her heavenly Father.

Love and mercy are the code for the true people of God. The ones who live like that are the ones who will be vindicated. Relationships are to be characterized by forgiveness, not by insisting on saving face or maintaining the upper hand.

Jesus sets this very different approach over against the current way Israel is treading which he saw would lead to disaster. Above all Jesus’ pleads for Israel not to follow the path of violent resistance.

‘Do not resist evil,’ he says: an inexplicable command if viewed as a moral axiom. But understood historically as a plea not to align themselves with the military resistance movement - it makes perfect sense in the overall context of the sermon.

The sermon is a call to Israel to resist in a different, less direct way. ‘Turn the other cheek,’ says Jesus. To be struck on the right cheek with the right hand means being struck with the back of the hand – a sign of contempt by the aggressor and of humiliation for the victim. To ‘turn the left cheek also’ is not to be a doormat: it’s to insist on one’s dignity, to demand equality with the assailant. It is quiet, strong, dignified assertion. Peacemaking.

The way of Jesus shuns showy religious observance. God will not be bribed or manipulated by long prayers, ostentatious almsgiving, attention-grabbing

fasting. That's not who God is. That's an idol who can be conned or persuaded into giving what one wants. But God is Father and knows what his children need. Those who truly relate to God as Father will be vindicated. They need not be afraid. But those angling for land or national restoration or ancestral rights will be disappointed.

The whole way Jesus sets out can be summed up very simply in a basic rule of thumb: whatever you want others to do to you, do that to them.

Jesus ends the sermon with a grim warning: the only way for Israel to avoid personal and national disaster is for them to change direction and follow his way.

The house built on the rock, in 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel, would have been heard as a reference to the temple. If Israel will not choose Jesus' way their most precious national institution is itself at risk. His later turning over the tables in the temple enacts the consequences the sermon tries to avoid.

In its historical context the sermon confronts its listeners with a stark choice. Israel can stand over against its enemies, isolate herself from them, struggle and battle with them exercising the politics of coercion, power and control and hope Yahweh will vindicate them because they are pure.

Or Israel can take up the alternative set out by Jesus marked by meekness, non-violence, mercy, peacemaking, reconciliation, forgiveness, generosity.

To what extent does this choice still confront us today? In personal and institutional life? In our families – in our dealings with children, spouses, parents? In congregational life? In our dioceses? In the life of the national church? In the international Anglican Communion?

I tend to think the choices before us are just as stark as they were for Israel in Jesus' day. The temptation to secure our own position is just as great now as it was then. The risks to our institutions and in our personal lives are just as marked. And the urgency is just as pressing.

And yet, even in this Synod we have snatched glimpses of the transforming work of the Spirit among us, of the better way. It is not yet too late.

'Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ... And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ... and great was its fall.'

Amen.