

Sermon for St Matthew 17

It is said that when a priest preaches a sermon, it is actually written for their own spiritual growth as much as anyone else's – such personal reflections produce lessons for the preacher as much as for their audience. One of the greatest spiritual writers of the 20th Century was a North American Roman Catholic Priest called Henri Nouwen. His works are profound and extremely easy to read. As with many spiritual writers who are able to speak with feeling and integrity, Henri's richness is based in personal experience and struggle. He struggled for much of his life with his sexuality and as a consequence was prone to prolonged periods of depression. Much of this morning's sermon is based in no small part of Nouwen's writings, even though I do not directly quote him.

“I desire mercy and not sacrifice”. These are the words Jesus uses towards the end of today's Gospel reading for the calling of St Matthew. Jesus is actually using the words of the prophet Hosea. In reminding the Pharisees that God desires mercy and not sacrifice, Jesus is speaking out against the kind of piety that claims to put God first but then lacks compassion and understanding for one's fellow human being. Those for whom faith is all about outward actions and not enough about deep love. But what, we may ask, does mercy look like?

Well, I would like to venture that mercy has certain characteristics in every instance, most chiefly:

Generosity, Compassion, Temperance, Forgiveness

Many of us have two or three of these in abundance, but it is not easy to have all four. So let us explore each in their turn:

Generosity is a difficult thing to tie down. We are all generous in our own ways. But how do we properly assess this for ourselves? There are the obvious passages of scripture, the most famous of which being Jesus' message to the disciples after his encounter with the rich man, 'it will be difficult for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven', or the words of Deuteronomy that we should 'give without counting the cost'. They are not so much a warning against acquiring wealth as how we relate to it. Along with money it includes teaching about our relationship to all possessions. This is why many monastic orders require their monks and nuns to give up all worldly possessions, in order to avoid the perils of a relationship with possessions getting in the way of their relationship to their brothers and sisters and to God. For us, I guess the simple question these teachings are asking us to reflect upon is; 'would we be willing to make ourselves a little worse off in order to help another?'

Again, this is not just about money, but all things. Are we able to be generous to others with our time, attitudes and resources? Are we able to support others when they most need us, in whatever way that may manifest itself?

This of course moves us straight into our second aspect of mercy, which is compassion. To show true compassion we need to have a generous heart. And compassion comes in many different guises. When a person comes to us for assistance, do we offer our support without first judging them? This is really tricky and requires a brave and hopeful response to help them in the present and future without asking too many questions about the past. In order to allow them to leave the past behind them, we need to avoid allowing it dictate their future. Compassion, then, is tightly aligned to mercy.

The third of our points is temperance, or at least a certain form of temperance. In this instance, temperance could be understood as giving other people the benefit of the doubt. Temperance is a term St Paul uses an awful lot. He wasn't particularly gifted in this regard, but he recognises its central importance and in his letters you can often feel him grappling with it. Our world is not good at temperance on any level, but least of all towards each other. Our culture so often seems geared towards revenge and once we give in to those notions we enter a slippery slope. It is really hard when we feel wronged in some way just to let that go.

The tribalism we see in our world concerning politics, religious extremism or various social movements is troubling. And they all begin with a person in a room who cannot let go of a grievance. The history of both the local and world-wide church is littered with splits that have begun this way. But so too are businesses, nations, organisations, communities and even families the world over. Each begin with what feels to the person like a perfectly valid grievance, but it always ends with events spiralling out beyond anyone's control.

This leads us naturally on to our final element of mercy, which is forgiveness. This speaks for itself. We are simply incapable of showing mercy unless we are able to practice true forgiveness and let go of our grievance, no matter how big or small. Forgiveness frees the heart from the black cancer that grievances generate. To forgive is to allow the cleansing light of Jesus to heal the hurt and pain, confusion and negativity. Forgiveness frees the soul to reach out to another person in mercy. Only with a free soul can we then be merciful in a truly non-judging way.

‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice’. It is interesting that Jesus should use these words whilst eating with tax-collectors and sinners, and not with the sick and vulnerable. Matthew was despised by much of Jewish society – he collected taxes for Rome. He represented a group of people who made money from taxing other people. This is why, when the Pharisees arrive they are appalled and instantly try and sow division amongst the group of disciples by talking about Jesus behind his back with accusations about his conduct for showing support for the wrong kinds of people. They are desperate to divide those following Jesus. But as in all such cases of deceit and gossip, word gets back to him. His response is to challenge them theologically: ‘God desires mercy and not sacrifice, go and learn what this means’, he says.

What a strange place to use such a saying. Although considered sinful, Matthew and his tax-collector friends don’t appear to be either needy nor vulnerable. Except of course he is both needy and vulnerable, because we all are. We all desperately need God’s mercy, and Matthew is no different.

Hidden in today’s text we see all the aspects of mercy that we explored earlier: Generosity, Compassion, Temperance and Forgiveness. Forgiveness probably most of all. Matthew desperately needs to know that his past will not hold him back from God. Jesus recognises in Matthew, as indeed for us all, that there is so much that is hidden under the surface that needs releasing. Matthew is in desperate need to be freed from his worldly troubles. In other words, Matthew desperately needs to find God. So Jesus is generous about Matthew’s situation, compassionate in response, temperate in his actions towards him and forgives without question Matthew’s past. Matthew is free to start a new slate.

As a result, this tax collector becomes an Apostle (one of Jesus' closest followers and leaders of the church). He even gets a Gospel named after him. If Jesus can show this kind of mercy to a tax-collector, then the possibilities for us are endless.

Amen.