

Sermon for King's College Chapel, Fourth Sunday after Trinity

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"Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful...forgive, and ye shall be forgiven".

That reading from Luke's gospel is full of phrases which linger in the collective Christian memory, like little summaries of the whole of Jesus's teaching. I've quoted just two. There are others, such as "why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but perceivest not the beam that is in thine own eye?" I remember as a child at Sunday School wrestling with the thought of a wooden beam in the eye, and certainly not understanding what a 'mote' was. But the point of Jesus's sayings here – which the gospel-writer puts at the end of his version of what in Matthew's gospel is the sermon on the mount – is surely central to the meaning of the Gospel, the good news that Jesus proclaimed. It is a sharp reversal of the idea of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth: it is an appeal for a radical idea of forgiveness and mercy – "Judge not, and ye shall not be judged". It is the basis of an extraordinarily far-reaching humanism, a way of living which has much in common with the teaching of other great world religions, not least aspects of Buddhism and Islam.

But we shouldn't get too carried away. Before the gospel reading, the epistle delivered a rather different tone, from Paul's letter to the Romans. This was rejection of the world, with the world seen as a place of suffering and torment – "For we know that the whole creation groaneth, and travaileth in pain together until now" – with the prospect of release only in the future, with the coming revelation of the "sons of God", the coming that is of those who are saved. Paul touches here on the great Christian themes of judgement and the end of things, with eyes not so much on what we do here and now, but rather on what lies in store for us, in the light of Christ, away from the harshness and sterility (as he sees it) of this world.

There are then, it seems, two sides of faith laid out for us today. One reaches out to embrace people around us, to learn to accept them in themselves, as they are, to estimate them as highly as we estimate ourselves – if not higher. The other turns us away from the values and experiences of this world, and sets our thoughts, our hopes, our values, on something distinct and different, something almost unimaginable, beyond the categories of time and space. The one in a sense is a kind of natural religion, a religious humanism which sees in humanity at large much to treasure. The other is a revealed religion, a religion focused on the things above which cannot be

seen or grasped in terms of the experiences of this world. The one is somehow embedded in common human experience, because it teaches us to address common human experience constructively and hopefully. The other is specific, inexplicable and even shocking – the faith of virgin birth, of crucifixion, of resurrection, of judgement and the end of time. The one is ethics, in essence – the teachings of Jesus that lie at the heart of Christian attitudes to the world and to others. The other is doctrine – the teachings about Jesus that seem bizarre and even offensive to many.

Now it's obvious that this sermon isn't going anywhere unless it recognizes that *both* sides are necessary for an authentic Christian faith. But we should stay with the ethics for a while longer. For the ethics of the Gospel are certainly in a sense the core of the Gospel. There are many people who think that the way you treat others is the standard by which you can test or measure the sincerity of someone's faith. And they are absolutely right. Jesus always shows himself more sympathetic to those who are generous and open to others, than he does to those who are strictly and self-consciously correct in belief. In the passage just before our Gospel, according to Luke Jesus says: "As ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise. For if ye love them which love ye, what thank have ye?" This is wisdom for the world. This is truth by which we can live with one another, in peace and good will.

All the same, there's a problem if we think that, in repeating these words, we have exhausted all Jesus had to say of importance on things – not because the ethical principles here are in some way unstable or problematic, but because Jesus after all says, and represents, things much less 'nice' or cuddly. Faith makes strong demands of us, not just in the way we relate to others, but in the beliefs we are called to confess. And there's no getting round that. Try to cut away the awkwardness, the fact that Christianity is not just a way of living harmoniously, but a call to repentance and faith in a Lord who triumphed over death, and you end up with something bland and ultimately toothless. It was the poet Adrian Mitchell who summed that up best for me, in 'The liberated Christ gives a press conference':

I would have walked on the water
But I wasn't fully insured.
And the BMA sent a writ my way
With the very first leper I cured...

...I'm going to shave off my beard and cut my hair
Buy myself some bullet-proof underwear
I'm the liberated Christ
And I've got no blood to spare.

What Mitchell hints at here is that an undemanding religion, a religion of good sentiments but without specific and challenging demands, can't save anyone, because

it can't answer to the depth of human suffering. It can't break us out of the cage in which our desires catch us. To cut a long argument short, ethics isn't enough really enough. The wisdom for the world must be also a wisdom given *to* the world, a wisdom that comes from elsewhere, and isn't dependent on the fragility of human ambition.

And in a way, that is all that Paul here in Romans is trying to say. Paul has a fierce reputation among Christians as a man of challenge, directness, criticism and conviction, a man of passion. I have no doubt he was also a man of compassion and generosity. But he knew human suffering from the inside – betrayal, persecution, imprisonment, torture, loneliness, the lot. And his Jesus, the Lord in whose service he died, was a radical surprise, not a simple step in human logic or in natural religion – a revelation on the road to Damascus, a faith in things unseen, and out of the experience of this world.

“Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful”. There are two paths into the heart of faith. God gives us his Son, and in him is life and truth, the overcoming of the failure of the world. But God gives us in his Son wisdom for the world, teaching that helps us live together in peace. God is merciful, Jesus tells us: we should live as God is, living his love to the world. Amen.