

The God Who Speaks

10: Making Peace

Opening Prayer and Welcome

God our loving Father,
You made us your children in baptism.
Pour out on us the gifts of your Holy Spirit.
Help us as a parish to know the paths we must follow
so as to build up your kingdom.
Teach us to grow in faith,
to encourage one another with words of hope,
and to care for your family with love.
Let us bear witness to the Good News,
and be faithful followers of your Son,
our Lord Jesus Christ
who lives and reigns with you
and the Holy Spirit
for ever and ever.
Amen

Introduction to the Theme

In the fifth chapter of his gospel, Matthew gathers together some of the things that were remembered from Jesus' teaching. They're quite a mix, and they end - at verse 48 - with a statement, a command, that seems just impossible: 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect'. That is what the whole chapter is building up to - the teaching that we should be perfect, just as God is perfect. The stark reality hits us, of course, that there is an infinite gulf between God's perfection and even our most perfect efforts to be perfect. It seems mad.

In fact, it doesn't stop there: the teaching continues right through chapter six and through chapter seven, right to the end where Matthew tells us, 'Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes'. *Astounded!* What, do you imagine were they saying to themselves as they walked away, back to their homes and their families?

The seeming impossibility of the high standard set by Jesus has left many, many teachers flummoxed, but the challenge to understand Jesus' meaning has - again and again - drawn people back to the text.

But, to begin, let's remember that Jesus understood humanity in a very biblical way: his understanding was rooted in the teaching, from the book of Genesis right at the beginning of the bible story, that human beings are *made in God's image* and that they are the recipients of God's ongoing promise, as told in the story of the exodus from Egypt, and in the books of the prophets. For a person to be perfect, therefore, was for them to be as God had created them to be, throughout their own 'exodus' journey of their lives.

To understand that no amount of 'reaching towards perfection' will enable us ever to say that we've arrived at being perfect, is not something that should cause us to despair: Jesus' teaching is given to us *for hope*.

And to give strength to that hope, Matthew begins these three chapters - five, six and seven - with words we've undoubtedly heard many times. Let's see if we can hear something new now:

Scripture Reading

Matthew 5:1-12 (NRSVACE)

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you’.

Discussion

*You may find it helpful to sit with the text in silence for a little while. Then, in a spirit of helping one another, you could share your thoughts and discuss with one another what you notice in this text from the Bible. **Listen to one another** because God also speaks through our sisters and brothers in Christ, and through us.*

You can use the following to help you, or explore other thoughts that come to mind:

What phrase stands out for you here? Is there a phrase that is particularly close to your heart, or that you find particularly difficult to understand?

These are commonly called ‘The Beatitudes’, from the Latin word ‘Beatus’, which means ‘Blessed’, but some translations use other words like ‘Happy’. What do you think Jesus wanted people to understand by his words?

A quiet reflection

Close your eyes and remain in quiet for a little while. Ask yourself if you can feel God’s Presence right now. Or perhaps you can think back to something that happened today, or yesterday, that - on reflection - says to you that God is near, perhaps that God has spoken to you. Or it could be in a memory that comes to mind, where you can say, perhaps, that God was close?

Jesus says to us, ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God’. Allow those words to sit with you quietly.

When you think of peace, does an image come into your thoughts? Do you think of peace in a way that is clear and makes sense for you, or is it just an idea, or even just a word? Does the word peace make you remember the lack of peace in the world, or the lack of peace you may feel inside you: things to worry about; people to worry about; pressures, commitments, work targets - all the things that peace is *not*?

Does the idea of peace attract you, or do you find it boring? Does it make you think of a phrase like *Justice and Peace*, or peace-keeping troops, or peace talks and negotiation? Do you think

about *peace and quiet* - peace as an absence of something - or of peace between people, between nations, between warring factions?

The image of peace that you have within you is vital to the next step: because how can I make peace if I have no understanding of what it is?

And my understanding will be unique: it is mine, and it is mine to bring into the world.

There is no **one** kind of peacemaker: we are each called to bring and make peace right here where we live.

So what is your special gift? Your special understanding of peace?

Once you can grasp that for yourself, you can grasp Jesus' promise: 'they will be called children of God'.

Not '*they will call themselves*' but '*they will be called*'.

By whom? By God? By other people?

Who will recognise the peacemakers in our world?

Am I able to recognise a peacemaker myself - do I know someone who is a peacemaker? What do I see in them that tells me that they are makers of peace?

My answers are mine, they are my own, because only I can bring peace - only I can recognise peace - with *my* eyes, in *my* heart.

Scripture Reading

Matthew 5:43-48 (NRSVACE)

'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect'.

Discussion

As we mentioned earlier, chapter five of Matthew's gospel ends with Jesus' teaching that we should be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.

And notice what comes immediately before it! It is a teaching about peace.

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You can use the following to help you, or explore other thoughts that come to mind:

Do you notice that Jesus says, 'You have heard that it was said... But I say to you...'? He does it again and again in this account of his teaching. He is demonstrating a point that he makes shortly afterwards in the gospel: 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil' (Matthew 5:17). What do you think Jesus means by this?

Again, this passage, which looks like a single text, is likely to be a gathering-together of things people remembered that Jesus had said, all put together here because Matthew understood that they were connected. What do you think connects these lines together for you?

The Church Teaches

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

‘This Beatitude makes us think of the many endless situations of war in our world. Yet we ourselves are often a cause of conflict or at least of misunderstanding. For example, I may hear something about someone and I go off and repeat it. I may even embellish it the second time around and keep spreading it... And the more harm it does, the more satisfaction I seem to derive from it. The world of gossip, inhabited by negative and destructive people, does not bring peace. Such people are really the enemies of peace; in no way are they “blessed”’.

Peacemakers truly “make” peace; they build peace and friendship in society. To those who sow peace Jesus makes this magnificent promise: “They will be called children of God”. He told his disciples that, wherever they went, they were to say: “Peace to this house!” (Luke 10:5). The word of God exhorts every believer to work for peace, “along with all who call upon the Lord with a pure heart” (see 2 Timothy 2:22)...

It is not easy to “make” this evangelical peace [this peace described in the gospels], which excludes no one but embraces even those who are a bit odd, troublesome or difficult, demanding, different, beaten down by life or simply uninterested. It is hard work; it calls for great openness of mind and heart, since it is not about creating “a consensus on paper or a transient peace for a contented minority”, or a project “by a few for the few”. Nor can it attempt to ignore or disregard conflict; instead, it must “face conflict head on, resolve it and make it a link in the chain of a new process”. We need to be artisans of peace, for building peace is a craft that demands serenity, creativity, sensitivity, and skill’.
(Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 87-9, 19 March 2018)

*Read these extracts again and sit with them for a short while in silence.
Then feel free to share with one another the thoughts that come to your heart.*

Closing Prayer

We thank you, Gracious Father, for this time of reflection.
We ask you to give us a fresh understanding of your Presence in our lives.
Strengthen us, we pray, in our faith
Help us to be present to each moment
So that we may see You and hear Your Voice
Everywhere and in all things and all people.
Give us hearts and minds that seek the face of Jesus,
And help us, through the power of the Holy Spirit,
To be always grateful for your blessings,
For the gracious gift of Your Presence.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ
In the unity of your Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Reading suggestion

Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 19 March 2018. This *letter of encouragement* to the Church has the subtitle ‘On the Call to Holiness in Today’s World’. As well as a lovely reflection on the meaning of the Beatitudes (Chapter 3), this is a deeply practical guide to reflection on holiness, how we can recognise it and how we must fight for it.