

Sermon series week 6

Blessed are the merciful

It might seem odd, but I want to start today with the last line of our reading from the letter of James:

‘faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead’.

But this is the sixth week of our sermon series on the Beatitudes, so you’re maybe thinking I should be starting with ‘blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy’.

The problem is, I normally like to talk mainly about the gospel, and reading today’s gospel (Luke 6:27-38), it struck me how difficult some of it is, if we think of it as telling people how to react to what they have to live through. It’s a passage that’s wide open to abuse. It could be – and often has been – used to tell people: ‘put up with what anyone does to you’ – in whatever circumstances, so the powerful and abusive get to carry on doing what they want.

But if we think about it in relation to the extreme conditions of Jesus’ own life, it becomes something different.

The reason I started with ‘faith, if it has no works, is dead’, is because in Jesus’ life and ministry we see just what it means for faith and works to be inextricably linked. When we look at Jesus, we see him live out exactly what he preached. He didn’t just tell us how we should act towards each other, he showed us. And he didn’t just tell us truths about God, he lived them.

If we read today’s gospel thinking about what Jesus *did* as well as what he said, we see the connections very clearly. Jesus did

all of this: he loved his enemies who wanted to kill him; he did good to those who hated him; he blessed those who cursed him; he had everything taken from him; he was put to death. And at the end, he still forgave and still loved: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'.

Jesus' actions put into practice what he taught about the Father's love. And what he taught, as in this passage, is how to love as the Father does; and that we should love in the way the first part of the reading describes because God does. God loves even those who hate him, God 'is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked'. He knows all, he forgives all, as Jesus did on the cross. *That* is the basis for our response. If we want to be Christ-like, it means learning to love as Christ does, as God does.

But today's gospel shows us the extreme. Jesus' life and death took place in quite extreme circumstances. What is true is that many Christians, many people, still live in conditions of persecution and foreign occupation and war, and for them today's gospel will speak very strongly into their own circumstances.

Another thing to think about is that for people trying to support family or friends struggling with mental health issues or addictions, this gospel might also be particularly powerful, because sometimes it can feel very much that the person you love is acting as your enemy and taking everything from you and hurting you, and even though you know that that is because of the illness, it can be very difficult to hold on to that love you have for them. Realising how deeply God understands this can give the strength to carry on.

For most of us, however, our lives as Christians aren't lived out in those extremes, or only very occasionally. For most of us, the reading from James (James 2: 1-17) is probably a much more applicable guide. For most of us, being merciful and non-judgemental is much more of a day-to-day rather mundane nature. How do we treat each other, how do we treat people who are different, who don't belong to the same social class, who don't think or behave or talk in the same ways or in the same language as us, who aren't as fit and healthy or talented or musical or well paid? We constantly run up against our instincts to treat people differently because of how we perceive them.

But here the basic point Jesus makes in the gospel is still the same. The reason why this is important is because of what Jesus taught us about God's love and forgiveness. God is merciful, and is merciful towards us,

and throughout Scripture God has been trying to get through to us that what he wants is for us to 'do justice and to love kindness, and to walk humbly' with our God (Micah 6:8). For us to then turn around and be unmerciful towards God's other children is to show that we really do not believe what we say we believe. Faith without works is dead.