

SERMON
Sunday 5th February 2023 / Epiphany 5
Text: Matthew 5:13-20

One of the hardest problems we have in hearing or reading the Bible, is that of time.

In other words we don't have a time machine.

But even if we did, I don't think it would help much.

we would still have our ideas,
our perceptions formed by our own culture.

If we tried to get back to the people
Matthew is writing to,
we'd be in a strange land,
among very unfamiliar people.
No doubt they'd think us pretty odd, too.

In many ways, the gospel today
underlines the great distance or gulf that is between
our time and the first century of the Christian era.

The verse where the passage ends today,
only makes things harder for us to understand.

(Read out)

"For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Scribes and Pharisees!!!
We have got to be like them...even better than them...
That can't be right!

First a history lesson....

Matthew is writing mostly for Jewish Christians,
who had been raised to keep the laws and rules of Judaism.
Some of them had probably been Pharisees before their conversion.

Part of the issue for us, is that
when we hear a word like: “Pharisee,”
we already have a set of ideas.

We think of proud, intolerant group,
filled with self-admiration for themselves
and full of harsh criticism for people they believed to be unclean, sinners.

But in history,
The Pharisees, or Pious Ones,
began their history as a reforming group,
intent on bringing the Jewish people back to faith in their God.

They believed that the best way to do
that was to stress the Law of God,
as given by Moses
and elaborated on in the religious books
developed over the centuries.

In Jesus’ time, some of these Pharisees
opposed the teachings of Jesus
because they thought he was undermining God’s Law.

They saw him as a threat to religious purity.
Not all of them opposed Jesus.
Two are named as his supporters.

As the church grew,
opened itself to non-Jews
and developed its own teachings,
there was a great debate about the place
of Old Testament Law in the life of Christians.

Matthew, a Jew himself,
wants to assure Jewish converts
that Jesus hadn’t come to abolish God’s law.

In fact he records Jesus as saying
that the whole law would remain in force forever.

And yet in the gospel we just heard,
Jesus says that in keeping this law,
we have to do much better than the Pharisees.

So what does this mean?

Is Jesus saying that we must keep the Jewish Law,
all that stuff about what we can eat,
or what we can do on the Sabbath?

Are we to be more like our common perception of the Pharisees
inaccurate as it may be in places,
are we to think we are better,
more moral, more upright,
than anyone else?

Are we meant to be more harsh in our judgment of others,
intolerant of anyone who is different, or not up to the standard we set?

We have had a history lesson, now some context...
This difficult passage comes in the middle
of what we call the Sermon on the Mount.

It is interesting that
just as Moses gave the Law to Israel on Mt Sinai,
so now Jesus gives the law to his disciples and those who would follow him, on a “mountain or high
hill”.

Last week he began with a description of those who are blessed.

He will go on to expand, the meaning of the Law.

And in the verses that come after this gospel,
Jesus will warn against anger that can leads to violence.

“You shall not kill,” begins with our dealing with what happens when we give way to anger, or
when when we take offense.

In this Sermon on the Mount,
Jesus will teach us that we are to seek reconciliation
with people who we quarrel with,
that we can’t “come to the altar”
if we haven’t done all in our power to love our neighbor;
because for loving those close to us,
those in the communities around us,
is one of the commandments of the Law Jesus identified as the foundation of “all the Law and the
Prophets.”

*So in the midst of all this
what can we take home with us from the gospel today?*

Well,
Keeping the law of God is not, it seems clear,
a matter of feeling and acting
as if we are superior to those who,
in our judgment, fail to live up to our standards.

We love God in loving others.
And if we were honest with ourselves,
we are in no state to judge others.

If we fall into becoming 'pharisaical',
i.e self-righteous or judgmental
then our reading today from Isaiah
can perhaps be a corrective..

God, speaking through Isaiah says this...

Is not this the fast that I choose:

*to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to
hide yourself from your own kin?*

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly;

*If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer
your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,*

then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.

Having received God's love in Jesus,
despite ourselves, we are called and sent to help those who stumble.

It seems the road to holiness, righteousness
is the path of love, compassion,
of caring and sympathy,
of helping each other along that journey,
stopping to assist those who have become tired,
have fallen on the way,
or who have given up in despair.

On the journey of faith,
we are not called to judge those who stumble,
who fail to obey what we presume the teaching of Jesus is.

We are called to go out of our way to care.

The whole point, it seems, of God's Law is to urge us
to put God and others first,
and to die to our own self-love and desire for self-preservation.
Remember what I said last week about the need to 'overcome' ourselves...

Let's remember that the strength to live for God and for others
doesn't come from our attempt to keep God's commandments,
and how successful we might presume we are at that.

That strength to live for God and for others,
comes from God, in Jesus, by the Spirit.

We meet here today to receive that strength,
that grace,
not as the self-righteous company of God-supporters,
but as those who know they also are in need of God's mercy.

When we leave this place to "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord,"
let us remember that we go as a forgiven and reconciled people,
and as an empowered people,
strengthened to keep God's Law by loving all who we shall meet,
and being loved by them in turn.

Prayer...

O God, who brings light to shine in our darkness,
we are drawn to your feet in worship
Your creation facing its creator.
Hearts laid bare by your light
Humbly asking for your mercy.

We come to you as a people in need
of assurance and forgiveness.
We come to you as a people in need
of healing and wholeness.
We come dependent upon your love.

Draw us close.
Enfold us in your arms.
Fill us with your Spirit
that we might reflect your light
within this dark world,
speak your Word with boldness

and draw others to your feet.

We ask this through your dear Son Jesus Christ.

Amen