

Living the Sermon on the Mount

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Familiar as the words of the Sermon of the Mount may be, the standards that it sets for Christian living continue to pose a radical challenge to followers of Christ. Fr Jack Mahoney continues his study of the sermon, asking what value we might find in historical and more modern attempts to interpret and live up to the values set forth in this important passage in Matthew's Gospel.

In previous articles I have explored 'The Meaning of the Sermon on the Mount' and 'The Shape of the Sermon on the Mount' as a prelude to considering in this article how Christians are meant to accept Jesus' Sermon and put it into practice.¹ As noted in the preceding article, 'For centuries, the sermon has ... been considered as providing the epitome of Christian morality and religious devotion.' Although it cannot possibly cover the whole range of moral and religious behaviour, its stress on morality as essentially internal, without completely disregarding its external expressions, and its emphasis on the importance of God- and other-centred motivation in one's religious and devotional activity, are essential elements of all genuinely Christian behaviour. Yet many people are known to have found the Sermon difficult, if not impossible, to observe in all its requirements. One consequence has been the development of various ways of not so much living as living *realistically* with, the Sermon, accepting the sympathetic spirit of the remark of the *Didache* (chapter 6), 'if you are able to bear the entire yoke of the Lord, you will be perfect; but if you are not able to do this, do what you are able'. It might be useful, however, at this stage to quote the warning given by the German scholar, Georg Strecker that, 'there is scarcely a realm of New Testament exegesis in which the danger of erroneous interpretations is so great as in the area of actualizing the Sermon on the Mount'.² St Francis of Assisi had a point when he is said to



have demanded, 'the Gospel without the gloss' (*evangelium sine glossa*), or explanatory footnotes, for in this case many of the attempts to explain the Sermon on the Mount can easily slide into explaining it away.

Indeed, the Sermon has been so widely respected as morally demanding and there has also been such a determination to give it proper respect, that various strategies developed historically to enable Christians to be able to take it seriously while living fairly comfortably with it. One move adopted by Augustine was to add various phrases, proposing, for example, that we should not judge others *falsely*, or we should not be angry *without cause*, or we should at least be prepared *in spirit*, if not in actuality, to accept Jesus' teaching. Other moves come down to maintaining that the sermon must be taken in all seriousness, but only in some respects. The most widespread and notorious of these strategies was the double standard approach which developed by the time of the Middle Ages, requiring the sermon to be taken seriously by only some members of the Church. These were the men and women who felt they had a vocation to enter what had by then come to be called the life of the 'evangelical counsels', a programme of behaviour aiming at 'perfection' suited to monks and nuns living a cloistered and sheltered existence and perhaps motivated by their understanding of the injunction of Matt 6:48 to 'be perfect', as we saw in the last article. Thomas Aquinas, for example,

formatted the full gospel teaching of Jesus into the three 'evangelical' vows undertaken on entering the state of religious life: the vow of poverty, involving giving up all wealth; the vow of perpetual chastity, involving giving up all the delights of the flesh; and the vow of obedience, entailing the giving up of all of one's own will.³ Such a demanding programme aimed at a state of spiritual and moral perfection, at attaining to one's salvation with security, or room to spare. But it was a regime scarcely to be expected of lay men and women who were immersed in the worldly activities of marriage, of business dealings, of earning a living and of other temptation-prone activities. From these surely the most that could be expected was to save their souls from damnation by just keeping the commandments.

It was to this very selective and discriminatory theology of Christian 'vocation' that Martin Luther took such strong exception. The idea of God 'calling' a select few women and men out of the secular world into a life and expected state of moral and religious 'perfection' not only introduced a deep class distinction into the Christian body between what Oberman called a 'religious elite' and all the rest;⁴ it also institutionalised into a programme of what the Reformers deprecated as 'good works' the moral teaching of Jesus which he had originally addressed to all his disciples without exception. In strong contrast, Luther appealed to the advice given to the Corinthian Christians by St Paul (1 Cor 7:20) and generalised it into his revolutionary Reformation theology of 'calling', or *Beruf*: 'Let each of you remain in the condition *in which* [not, into which] you were called'. 'Vocation' came out of the cloister; Christ's call to share the 'righteousness of the kingdom of God' was to be met in every walk of life in which a believer found him or herself called. The Second Vatican Council's Decree on the Church affirmed that the whole Church is called to holiness and that while some individuals do well to practise the evangelical counsels, nevertheless, 'all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity'.⁵

Having dispensed with the medieval strategy of viewing the Sermon on the Mount as instituting a double standard of morality within the body of the faithful, Luther, however, found himself being forced to introduce a division elsewhere, actually within the

life of each individual Christian. In one's private, personal and family life, Luther and his fellow-reformers were clear, the full moral teaching of Jesus was expected to apply in the exercising of a neighbourly, loving and forgiving concern in all one's dealings. However, this could scarcely apply to one's public and political life in society. How would society survive if we just gave to every layabout who asked, and took no steps to coerce the violent, as the sermon required? Here, in Luther's view, what was required instead was acknowledgement and recognition of the institutions set up by the creator as bulwarks to contain the floods of human sin, including government and the rule of law; and these should be administered in accordance with ordinary common sense. As Lazarus concludes, for Luther, 'not faith and love but reason and justice are normative for the temporal realm of life'.⁶

The danger then, of course, is to divide not the Christian body but the individual Christian, into a sort of moral schizophrenia. As a consequence, the issue of how to relate love and justice came to occupy a fairly central place in Protestant ethics, and one conclusion was to describe the Sermon on the Mount as enjoining a set of 'impossible ideals,' to use the phrase of the American, Reinhold Niebuhr. Luther believed Jesus was simply presenting an unattainable ideal and most Protestant theology has followed suit with this, in accordance with its tenet that the primary view of all law is, following the Mosaic law, not to inform or encourage us, but to identify us all as sinners. Hence the real purpose of the Sermon on the Mount is to confront us with the sheer impossibility of performing its commandments, so as to drive us to appeal in faith to the mercy of God.

A third, modern attempt to take the demands of the Sermon seriously while giving it a realistic interpretation introduces a division between earlier and later generations of Christians rather than into the body of the faithful, as the two standards interpretation achieved, or into the life of the individual, as Luther's approach threatened to do. This can be found in the explanation of the German Scripture scholar, Albert Schweitzer, who explained the ethical teaching of Jesus as an interim ethics, or ethics intended only for the time being. This *interimethik* was based, according to Schweitzer, on the belief of Jesus and his disciples that the world did not

have much longer to run. In the circumstances a superhuman moral effort was called for from the followers of Jesus and might, indeed, be possible; in other words, a moral sprint. In fact, however, the Christian life has turned out to be a marathon rather than a sprint, with the consequent need to adapt the moral pace and intensity of Christian living for a longer span of history. The main weakness of this view, however, as Jeremias pointed out, is that there is not the slightest indication of it in the New Testament.⁷

Various other attempts to interpret the Sermon on the Mount seriously but 'realistically' have been catalogued by H. K. McArthur.⁸ Finally, it might be enlightening to consider what we can learn from the literary form of the Sermon in the light of modern biblical scholarship. If it is an edited compilation of sayings of Jesus from earlier different situations and backgrounds, these sayings will each have had their own style, significance and overtones prior to the role that the evangelist now gives them. So, for instance, although all of the Sermon should be taken seriously, clearly it should not all be taken literally. Jeremias mentions 'occasional paradoxical exaggeration' and others can write of rhetorical simplification, but there appears to be more to it than that.⁹ Jesus was a prophet in the line of Israel's prophets, calling for a radical change of heart and foretelling a new situation of God's rule being initiated by his heavenly Father; and it is characteristic of prophets in the Bible and in society in general to exaggerate, to simplify situations and to emphasise one particular feature, or value, in order to make their point forcefully and have an impact on their hearers.¹⁰

Prophetic exaggeration can take two forms: extravagant language and concentration on a single value or element in a situation. Extravagant language can be seen easily for example in Jesus' advice to tear out an offending eye or amputate an offending limb (Matt 18:8-9 [all references from Matthew, unless stated otherwise]), although the ascetic, third century theologian, Origen, appears to have taken Jesus literally and 'made [himself a] eunuch' (19:12) as a precaution. Concerning one's response to violence, it appears that Jesus' commendations of turning the other cheek when struck, or going further than one is compelled to go, or handing over more than is stolen forcefully from one (5:39-42) are all intended as

striking extreme illustrations of his general teaching on how we should treat our enemies. Should we ascribe similar prophetic grandiloquence to Jesus telling his listeners and us to give to whoever asks something of us whatever they want (5:42), or to love one's enemies (5:44), or to his warning of the 'narrow gate' leading to salvation (7:13-14)?

Moreover, a prophet is almost by definition not conversant with a conflict of values, such as is frequently met with in life at a personal as well as at political levels. The prophet's mission is to ensure that the particular value or policy for which they are pressing shall not be ignored nor disregarded. Environmental concern is an obvious instance of the need to achieve a balance of competing considerations. In a moral context, loving one's neighbour does not automatically mean giving them whatever they want; it can at times mean opposing them, or even coercing them to act other than they wish. Sometimes actively taking steps to resist violence can be an expression of neighbourly love, either in defending third parties, or in preventing the neighbour from continuing to do wrong in abusing others. My old friend, the late Professor Ronald Preston of Manchester University, liked to ask his students the question, to which there is no answer, of what they thought the Good Samaritan would have done if he had come across the Jericho-bound Jew actually in the course of being beaten up (Lk 10:30-37). Would he have held back until after the attack was finished, or passed by on the other side, or would he have gone to the Jew's defence? In international relations, towards the end of last century the idea of 'humanitarian intervention' became acceptable foreign policy to protect citizens of another country who were being treated brutally by their legitimate regime; so much so that the practice was legitimised in 2001 when the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, followed by the World Council of Churches, redefined the policy from 'humanitarian intervention' to a 'responsibility to protect'.

In fact, the teaching on total non-resistance is probably today one of the most contentious topics in the Sermon on the Mount – Tolstoy insisted it required total pacifism – but it is worth noting that one cannot easily extrapolate to a social and political level what Jesus has to say in the Sermon on the Mount concerning the moral and devotional

behaviour of individual believers. Like the rest of the New Testament, it contains little, if anything, on social ethics, or how society as such ought to behave. There are occasional hints, such as the need to pay taxes and to respect authorities, yet there is tacit acceptance of slavery and the subordination of women. There could be several reasons for such silence on social matters. The New Testament documents we possess are all occasional, not systematic, writings, aimed at influencing the lives of believers within Christian communities and any outreach to the rest of society is predominantly expressed in religious, rather than political, terms. Moreover, many people in the early Christian community did expect an early *parousia*, or triumphant return of Christ, and this provided little incentive to attempt to reform the Roman Empire, especially from within what appeared a tiny vulnerable group of Jewish dissidents struggling for survival. It seems to have been only when Christianity was recognised formally by the State under Constantine that Christian leaders began to accept their Gospel responsibility towards social institutions and policies, such as Augustine's beginning to formulate what became the just war theory in international relations.

A final observation is worth making about living the Sermon on the Mount. Aquinas, and many moralists following him, held that the Ten Commandments given to Israel through Moses by divine revelation are equally attainable to human reason as any other moral framework.¹¹ Similarly, it can be argued that Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is eminently reasonable – that is, like the Decalogue it can be divested of its 'supernatural' context to still be presented as human ethics with some plausibility and attractiveness. However, 'secularising' the Ten Commandments tears them out of their supernatural context as 'the book of the covenant' (Ex 24:7) which God offered his chosen people and results in an enormous impoverishment of their purpose and role in the lives of believers.

Likewise, 'rationalising' the Sermon on the Mount divorces it from its theological context in Matthew's Gospel, which we saw earlier, and disregards its purpose as being the demanding yet grace-bearing code of life for the followers of Jesus as they enter into God's kingdom and live his new covenant with his new chosen people. Christian morality must be understood as part of an embracing love of God as well as of neighbour. Both the Decalogue and Sermon on the Mount begin with the gift of God and his covenant, and sketch the response of members of the chosen people, the ancient and then the new Israel, as they attempt to live with God's gift and grace in their lives.

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¹ See *Thinking Faith*, 29 May 2008; 13 July 2011.

² Strecker, G., *The Sermon on the Mount. An Exegetical Commentary* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1988), p. 23.

³ *STh* I-II, 108.4.

⁴ Oberman, H. A., *Luther. Man Between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 51.

⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, §40.

⁶ Lazarus, W.H., Lutheran Ethics, in J. F. Childress & J. Macquarrie, eds., *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1986), p. 362.

⁷ Jeremias, *The Sermon on the Mount* (London: Athlone Press, 1961), pp. 13-15.

⁸ H. K. McArthur, *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount* (London: Epworth, 1960).

⁹ Jeremias, 12.

¹⁰ J. Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology. A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 285-87

¹¹ Aquinas, *STh* I-II, 100, 1.