

Sermon for 12 February 2017

Today our Gospel reading continues where last week's left off with the next chunk of the Sermon on the Mount.

Last week's reading ended with Jesus telling his hearers "whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven".

Well, I don't know about you, but I actually find that quite scary. I mean, the scribes and the Pharisees were utterly fastidious in their keeping of what Jesus here calls the "commandments", all the rules and regulations of the law and the prophets, what we now call the Old Testament. And yet Jesus says: "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven". This sounds like a kind of über-Pharisaism, the fanatical religiosity of a secret, dangerous sect of the kind that preachers of the good old Church of England, people like me in other words, ought to be warning you against.

Today's Gospel reading only serves to heap up the agony. "You shall not murder" is, of course, part of the central core of the Old Testament law, one of the Ten Commandments given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. For most of this is a commandment that, in its literal form, we can confidently assert that we have kept: happily not many people, relatively speaking, have ever fallen into the temptation of taking another person's life. But Jesus wipes away every last trace of our self-satisfied grin by asserting that "if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement". This is really quite upsetting, for which of us can honestly say we have never been angry towards another human being? Anyone who did would have to be either very saintly or very self-deluded.

Passing on for the moment to the next paragraph, Jesus deals a similar blow with the commandment "You shall not commit adultery". Again, although the proportion is markedly higher than the proportion of the population who have committed murder, it's still not that many people who have disobeyed this commandment literally. Well, you may say, I've reached the stage in life where the temptation to lust has given way to a desire to put my feet up on

the sofa with a glass of wine in front of the television. But then think back to when you were 16... And as for the bit about swearing, there are some who seem to manage to avoid it, well, most of the time anyway: however, how many of us can honestly say we're one of them? Even if we can, Jesus didn't say *most* of the time.

No, I'm afraid we all fall short of the "righteousness [that] exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees". But if that is the case, who indeed *will* "enter the kingdom of heaven"?

The quick answer is: Jesus. His righteousness does indeed exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. He enjoyed the company of women, for example the Samaritan woman at the well, Mary and Martha, Mary Magdalene, he wasn't shy of their company - but he never showed lust. He showed righteous anger, for example towards the money-changers in the temple, but he was never angry if someone got in the way of what he wanted. He could, probably, have raised an army to depose the Romans from their rule in Palestine and be crowned king in Jerusalem – we can't be sure because he never tried: instead he received a crown of thorns and was put to death by crucifixion. He didn't murder: others murdered him.

In a way, though, none of this is really the point. It isn't as though Jesus tried a bit harder than even the best of the scribes and Pharisees did to keep the Old Testament law and succeeded where they failed – and commands us to follow him so that we too can enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus isn't a kind of super-Pharisee. He's the Son of God.

Yes, I'll say that again, Jesus is the Son of God. He didn't enter the kingdom of heaven by being better at keeping the law of God than the scribes and Pharisees. For Jesus, as Son of God, *heaven is home*. At his birth he left his home to be with us. To quote the Christmas hymn – based on a verse in St John's Gospel - "he came down to earth from heaven". And so at his Ascension Jesus didn't go to heaven as a reward for being the first person to keep the commandments, he went home. The Christmas story is about Jesus leaving his heavenly home: at his ascension Jesus goes back home, back to his heavenly Father, where, as Son of God, he belongs.

It isn't by any means everything they're about, I admit, but a major part of what the four Gospels are about is demonstrating who Jesus is. All four Gospels, after a prologue of varying length and content, tell us the story of

Jesus' baptism. And all four Gospels tell us, again in slightly different ways but all quite distinctly, that at his baptism a voice from heaven declared: "this is my Son, in whom I am well pleased". This happens before Jesus' ministry has taken place, before he has begun to "go about doing good", before he has called his disciples to follow him, before he has begun to teach and preach, before he has performed miracles of healing, before he has demonstrated his divine power over nature, before he has suffered and died, before he has risen from the dead. These things don't enable Jesus to enter the kingdom of heaven, they demonstrate that that is where he comes from, and that that is where he belongs.

Jesus' "righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees" because he is the Son of God, which means his home is in heaven, or rather his home *is* heaven. He fulfils the law out of who he is, out of his relationship with his heavenly Father. This is why, for the most part, the scribes and Pharisees reject Jesus. Jesus fulfils the law because he's God's Son, it is what he does because it flows from his very nature. The scribes and the Pharisees can only conceive of entering the kingdom of heaven as an attainment, something you might, or might not, who knows, get as a consequence of trying to obey the law as exactly as possible. They simply don't "get", can't enter the thought-world, of a man who doesn't have to strive to get to heaven, someone for whom heaven is home, the place where he comes from. Jesus and the Pharisees are operating on totally different wave-lengths, they're operating in parallel planes that don't intersect.

What does this mean? Surely it can't mean that we're doomed, like the Pharisees, to try and enter the kingdom of heaven by trying to keep God's law but never be sure we'll ever succeed because, unlike Jesus, we're not the Son of God? Well, in a sense that's just what it *does* mean. We can never enter the kingdom of heaven by taking the route the scribes and Pharisees tried, and failed, of trying to obey the commandments of God the very best we can. But, and this is the miracle of the gospel message, through faith in Jesus we come to share his nature, we get to share his filial relationship with his Father and thereby come to share with him in fulfilling the commandments. Jesus is uniquely the Son of God – but through faith in him we become sons and daughters of the Father, and brothers and sisters of Jesus and of one another. As it says of Jesus in that glorious prologue to John's Gospel we hear every Christmas time: "to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God". And the Holy Spirit, who brings us into this Father-child relationship, empowers us, like Jesus, to live following the

commandments of God.

What does this mean, that if we believe in Jesus we'll never be angry towards or lust after anyone ever again? Or, conversely, does it mean that it doesn't matter if we do? Neither of these is the case. It does matter if we're angry or lust or break any of the other commandments, to do so is still sin, and we are to strive to avoid sin, and confess our sin when we fall into it. And as believers we will continue to sin, no doubt about that. But the more we exercise our faith, the more we are rooted and grounded in Christ, through prayer, hearing his word, sharing fellowship with other believers, and active service in the world, the more we will grow in following God's commandments of love. That means, in the power of the Holy Spirit who gives us our new birth as God's children, increasingly we learn to love our loving Father with single-minded devotion as his children, and to love our neighbour as ourselves, as Jesus loves us. Amen.