

12 February 2023

Deuteronomy 30:15-20
1 Corinthians 3:1-9
Matthew 5:21-37

As I sat on that Galilean hilltop I gained a new perspective. The view up there is breathtakingly beautiful. My village on the shore below became somewhat lost beside the vast deep blue of the lake; the mountains on the other side dominated the skyline; to the south stretched the Bethshan plain carrying the Jordan, disappearing into the heat haze that blurred the horizon. I could sit there for hours, watching as the colours and shadows changed and shifted as the sun made its course from East to West; looking to see what would be revealed as the light caught it in a new way.

But on that particular day I had to concentrate, not on the view, but on the new perspective that was being unveiled in the words that Jesus shared with us there; perspective that took my breath away at the time; perspective that challenges and changes me still; perspective that comes into its clearest focus alongside another hilltop event – Golgotha.

Jesus challenged us to a righteousness greater than that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. A challenge indeed to have better understanding and behaviour that those who made it their life's work to interpret and apply the Torah, building the common law code of rabbinical teaching down the ages!

“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgement,’” he began, and I was still sitting comfortably: I’ve certainly not murdered anyone. I don’t think I have ever contemplated murder.

But then Jesus went on, and I started to squirm. “I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”

I've certainly been angry with some of my brethren. I found myself casting furtive glances around: near me were at least four that I'd become enraged by – Matthais who frustratingly broke, not one, but two spades he borrowed from me and who can't seem to keep his ever-growing pack of dogs from roaming through my home and workshop; Rufus who opposed me when I tried to express an opinion about the best way to deal with the Romans as they trample their way through our village; Anna who humiliated me when she spurned my youthful advances; Deborah who insists on telling others that I short-changed her husband. I've used terms of contempt – not always out loud, but at least under my breath or in my thoughts. How could Jesus set these perfectly natural responses alongside *murder*? Beyond those occasional abusive words, I'd certainly not acted on my anger in any way. How could a feeling be so wrong?

It was tempting to dismiss Jesus' words entirely. But new perspective came in time as I continued to journey with Jesus, and to see how he embodied and lived what he taught. I came to recognise that my anger with Matthais, Rufus and so on, while no longer having all of its early heat, still had its effect all this time later. There was tension in my dealings with Matthais – I wouldn't lend him anything as a neighbour. I found myself silent in the public square whenever Rufus was around. Every time I saw Anna I was on edge because I expected to be hurt again even though I had moved on. I avoided Deborah because I just knew that she would start firing up about the money

And I came to recognise that the way I talked about them and thought about them – klutz, twerp, cow, nark, ... – simply reinforced the expectation in me that they would wrong me again. I came to realise that it did in fact affect my behaviour. These things that I still held against them made me present myself at less than my best when I did happen across one of them.

So Jesus aptly followed this up with advice to settle disputes privately, in person, and quickly.

Jesus had said something that seemed quite ridiculous at first. He said that if we were making one's offering at the altar and remembered that someone had

something against us, we were to leave the gift there and go and be reconciled before coming back to make the offering. That's a round trip of six days!

It seems he was exaggerating; but he was doing it to magnify the importance of the issue. Here too was new perspective: from the small detail that we could see up close in the day to day realities of our relationships with those round about us, Jesus had us now looking to the far horizon of our relationship with God. The need to be at peace with one another is not just a "nice to have"; not just about peaceful coexistence and flourishing human relationships. The need to be at peace with one another is a manifestation, an out-working, of our relationship with God. What is the point then of bringing a sacrifice to honour God when one is dishonouring God by being at odds with another one of his beloved children? As Jesus' words gradually took root within me over the months and years to follow I would sometimes find myself at worship recognising that a barrier that had come between me and God because of an unresolved issue with a brother or sister. I find as the years go on that those breaches hurt more and more.

Some of our church leaders have now adopted the practice of having us share a kiss of peace when we are gathered for worship before we share in the Lord's Supper. I have come to value this innovation. It is neither glib nor magic: the brief moment and symbolic action is often not nearly enough to do the full work of reconciliation. Offering the sign of peace is not to say that we are now at peace; but it is at least an expression of the desire to be reconciled. That is a start. That is the beginning of a new perspective on relationships within the Body.

All of this perspective had to come later, because Jesus was carrying on and on, steadily raising the bar of righteousness as our discomfort increased. We were all squirming, and it was not because of the rocky ground on which we were perched as he taught.

The ancient commandment about adultery was intensified to include lustful looks and thoughts: Jesus said it was adultery in the heart. But who has not looked upon a beautiful woman and not been tempted, considering the possibility – if even for a moment?

As I thought about it afterwards, though, the true wisdom behind Jesus' words struck me. It was rather similar to Jesus' earlier point about harbouring words and thoughts of contempt about another: these thoughts, if allowed to take root, do ultimately have an impact on behaviour. Years ago I had been unfaithful to my beloved Elizabeth in my mind, again and again looking upon certain others in the village with desire coursing through my veins. I didn't act on any of it – not once – but it still hurt my marriage because my affection subtly started to be turned elsewhere, because of the secret shame, because entertaining the possibility of unfaithfulness in my mind was already a breach. I had done nothing, but still she noticed the wall that was growing between us. I thank God that confession, repentance, and forgiveness healed the growing breach.

I'm sure I was not alone in squirming. We were discomforted all the more when Jesus told us that it would be better to lose an eye or a right hand than to sin through it; squirming as we imagined what else might have to be excised to deal with adulterous desire.

He was exaggerating, again. This was not a *prescription* as to how to deal with the issue: which bodily part is really the cause of impure thoughts anyway? To cut out the brain is to die. Rather than a prescription, Jesus was again giving us perspective, magnifying the importance of the issue with this extreme illustration. The prescription then was quite simple: don't harbour these thoughts; it's just not worth the risk.

There was further discomfort as Jesus waded in on divorce. I had quite a discussion afterwards with Silas about it: he had ended up writing a certificate of divorce for his wife. He felt he could no longer live with her constant nagging. (Just quietly, I hear that she struggled with his tendency to dream up schemes to make them wealthy and then procrastinate about getting on with advancing any of them, let alone get the day's work done.) Anyway Silas was deeply offended by Jesus' assertion that he had made his wife a victim of adultery by exercising his right to divorce her, following the accepted legal procedure.

From time to time we've talked about it since, Silas and I; and I've told him the view I've come to in the years since we sat on that hilltop. You see, Silas wants to be justified in his actions. But in order for that to be the case, he wants Jesus not to

have said what he said. I've come to a different view, which is to say that we can assert, with Jesus, the vision for marriage to be lifelong and thus for divorce to be a wrong, while still recognising and having compassion for people who have committed that wrong. I have immense compassion for my brother Simeon, who in fear of a beating by a gang pulled a knife and stabbed one of them to death; but in that compassion I don't have to turn around and say that killing a man is right. The pagans seem inclined to divorce when the mood takes them, having no sense of commitment; contracting marriage on a whim with no sense that a sacred covenant is being entered into. It seemed that some of our own rabbis were drifting into such permissiveness too.

And before we had a chance to process all that, Jesus was on to another instance of making commitments, challenging us that our word should be our bond – our “Yes” to making a contract or other obligation being sufficient on its own without being bolstered by insincere oaths calling on greater and greater created things as if they were ours to pledge as security against our reneging. It is tempting, when not entirely convinced in oneself of one's commitment, to give the appearance of greater commitment by making it in the name of something greater than one's own word. When people heap up such oaths and pledges my gut tells me they are probably insincere and cannot be trusted; but I have to own I have succumbed to the temptation to do the same. The people around me were shifting on their haunches or backsides: they too could see the truth of Jesus' words.

On that hilltop we got new perspective. A new way of looking at how we should live; a new way for human flourishing in community.

The immediate prospect though was daunting, for the standard Jesus expressed was impossible to perfectly uphold. From these heights we could see the way of Jesus, the way of the kingdom of heaven: but rather than a broad straight highway the way of Jesus was shown to be a narrow way, like one of the winding tracks that ran amongst the hills and valleys of those parts.

It would take another hilltop to gain the full perspective. These kingdom ways of Jesus, this way of righteousness, would be travelled for us by Jesus on a hill on the

outskirts of Jerusalem, a hill they call Golgotha, the Place of the Skull. It was there that Jesus did what was necessary to fulfil all righteousness for us. Jesus refused to take the path of anger and forgave those responsible for his suffering and humiliation; Jesus lived and modelled self-giving, wholly devoted love; Jesus faithfully kept his word, taking full responsibility for everything.

Paul and the other apostles have explained to us that though this work of Jesus freed us from the consequences of failure, it has not taken away the need for us to take to heart Jesus' words. I am trying, with the Spirit's help, to cultivate kingdom values of reconciliation, trust and compassion. I'm getting better at it, but I fail still. I believe I understand God's good intention, but I fail to live it fully in the midst of the brokenness and complexity of life in this age while we still wait for Jesus to return as King. In trying to live in this way, however, I believe I am anticipating that kingdom life.

The kingdom way is a steep and difficult climb. But the kingdom life really is the ultimate panorama, the beautiful mountain-top vista of the glory of God's work.

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