

Bible Study Jesus Style
Psalm 119:1-8, Matthew 5:21-37

16 February 2020

This is the year of the Rat - that is according to the Chinese calendar, and, of course, China is very much in everybody's mind at present because of the devastating appearance of the *corona* virus. The year of the Rat is supposed to bring renewal and new beginnings, as it is the first year in the Chinese rotation of the 12 year cycle of signs. But, this year has not started well for China and our hearts go out to those affected by the disease whether in China or anywhere else.

In our church life, however, this is the year of Matthew, that is Matthew, the Gospel writer. As you may know the international Lectionary we use follows a three year cycle, and each of the years focuses on one particular Gospel: Matthew, Mark and Luke, with John's Gospel featuring in all three years, usually around the great Christian festivals. So, this year starting with the first Sunday in Advent, our gospel readings come from Matthew's Gospel. From its first inception Matthew's Gospel was the most popular, most often used and most loved of the gospels, though the claim that its writer would have been one of Jesus' original disciples of the same name, has not been substantiated.

What seems to be true though is that, this Matthew was a Jewish Christian author writing to a mainly Jewish Christian audience at a time when the early Christians were still part of Judaism, and some of them worshipped in their local synagogues, even though they increasingly stopped referring to these as synagogues and started to call them churches. In his groundbreaking book the American theologian, John Shelby Spong (*Biblical Literalism: A Gentile Heresy 2016*), sets out to show just how strongly the Christian Gospels reflect not only the Jewish Scriptures (our OT), but also Jewish patterns of worship. It is fascinating to read how he traces the structure of Matthew's Gospel back to Jewish synagogue worship and demonstrates how major parts of this Gospel seemed to have been written to follow the major Jewish religious festivals.

As we consider our two readings for today, we may come to the conclusion that Spong may have been onto something!

According to him Psalm 119, from which our first reading came from, would have been used at the Jewish Festival called Shavuoth, which was a solemn, annual renewal celebration recalling Israel's covenant with God through the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. In our NT reading from Matthew's Gospel, we heard part of what is called the *Sermon on the Mount*. If we believe our American theologian, Matthew would have collated some of Jesus' teachings into the Sermon on the Mount as the allocated readings for this same Jewish festival celebrating the *new* covenant in Jesus' interpretation of the Law.

Just listen to how Matthew introduces the Sermon on the Mount at the beginning of Chapter 5:

*When Jesus saw the crowds he went up a mountain.
There he sat down and when the disciples had gathered
round him, he began to teach them. (5:1-2)*

Do you see, what the gospel writer is doing here? He is showing his conviction that Jesus was a kind of second Moses, giving his teaching as the *new Covenant*. A new covenant that's not replacing or contradicting the original one, the Ten Commandments, but gives a kind of commentary on it and re-interprets it for a new age and for a new audience. And the liturgical connection can be further discovered by the way both Psalm 119 and the Sermon on the Mount starts with some beatitudes: Happy (or blessed) are those... and the fact that both can be divided into eight sections to be used 3 hourly for the 24 hour vigil, which was the usual format of celebrating this festival. Further more, the content of today's passage from the Gospel, clearly indicates its relationship to the giving of the Law.

Why all this may be of interest to us is that, it highlights the importance of knowing something of the OT in order to fully appreciate Jesus' teachings and to see how Jesus (and Matthew, and Paul and the other NT authors) used their Scriptures to make sense of, and to find guidance in them for, their own times, their own lives. I called this sermon Bible Study Jesus style, because I think we can learn a lot from Jesus' handling of Scriptures.

"*You have heard that they were told.... But what I tell you is this...*" is the repeated phrase by Jesus, which is then followed by an expansion or re-focusing of the traditional teachings. Jesus is talking to his disciples, Matthew is writing to his early Christian community

and we use the same teaching 2000 years later in our worship in church. Could this be an indication that these words are not meant for general consumption by giving everyone a blue print for living a good life? That it is more like an advanced course specifically addressed to those who already regard themselves as the people of God and followers of Jesus Christ? That it supposes an ongoing development of faith, a deepening and widening range of possibilities in the relationship with God?

In his exegesis of the Jewish Scriptures, Jonathan Sacks the former Chief Rabbi often draws his readers' attention not to be satisfied by the surface meaning of Biblical texts. With great insight he declares: "*The Torah* (that is the first five chapters of our OT) *is a deep and subtle book, and it does not always deliver its (full) message on the surface. Just beneath is another – and far more remarkable – story...*" (*Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: Lessons in Leadership 2015*). When we read the Sermon on the Mount we see Jesus tapping into this remarkable, under the surface meaning of Scripture. With the addition of his own Spirit-led understanding, he is guiding his disciples and us to look beyond the words of Scripture and raise our eyes to the living God. The God who has not ceased to be involved with humanity at the moment the Biblical canons were closed, but is still present among us. For if we take Scripture as the final word of God, we may unwittingly ignore God's desire to interact with us in a fresh and immediate way in the here and now. God is not only the God of Scripture, God is also the living God of our lives.

So when Jesus talks of murder – which is forbidden by God's Law - and connects it with anger, a very common, everyday emotion, he is teaching the disciples to be careful with their everyday feelings and emotions for they may contain the seeds that undermine God's on-going intention for human flourishing. Several more examples follow touching on family life, divorce, love and lust, swearing and lying and broken promises, questions that may have arisen at the time, and arguments, where some trespassers' defence was that they hadn't actually broken the (letter of the) Law.

Encouraged by Jesus' use of Scripture, perhaps we could look at our way of using the Bible. We have to acknowledge there is something in us, not quite grown-up, that likes to be told what to do. Are there areas in our discipleship where we may think we are following Scripture, yet where Jesus' vision of God's Kingdom cajoles us further into finding the actual 'heart of God's Law'? For

example, as good Christians we know that we are supposed to love our neighbours as ourselves and help them out in their need. And we do. Yet, don't we often find ourselves saying things like: 'You know where I am, you only need to ask'? Would not real love know what the need was and would it not anticipate where and how gentle help could be offered without being asked? Especially, knowing the difficulty we all might feel when we need to ask for help.

Or take the so-called golden rule, which is known in many religions and cultures, among them Judaism and Christianity. It appears in one shape or another in both the OT and the NT. This rule asks people to treat others as they would want to be treated. Yet, in the light of the Kingdom values may it not sound like a kind of bargaining, which is trying to limit God's unlimited love and is treating ourselves as the centre and measure of all things? Here Jesus says, there is more to Kingdom-spirituality than this.

We could also apply the same scrutiny in our relationship to global issues, which are gaining so much prominence right now. The unusually extreme weather conditions are just one indication of the importance of these issues. We might like to think ourselves as good citizens of the world because we act according to traditional laws, yet at the same time we may be bringing harm to other peoples of the world, or to the environment endangering the life of our planet. Jesus' challenge is to go beyond the minimal requirement of the law; and with the guidance of God's living Spirit in our hearts to serve, to seek justice, to protect the vulnerable, to offer welcome and compassion and to preserve the rich ecological heritage of the world for future generations.

So, learning from Jesus' way of using Scripture we may find the 'heart of the Law' not by ticking off boxes against particular rules, but in the constancy of God's faithfulness, God's goodness and God's integrity. All of which is lavished upon us and enable us to become Christ-like followers and servants of the Kingdom. As we come to the Table of Thanksgiving may Christ come alive for us and feed us with his love. **Amen**

*Erna Stevenson
Amersham Free Church*