

Epiphany 6
12/2/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Psalm 119:1-2, 105-6, 110-112
Matthew 5:21-37

Choosing life

Our reading from Deuteronomy is Moses' summing up of his presentation of the commandments and statutes of God for the people of Israel, on the eve of their crossing into the Promised Land. With that summary comes the call: choose the life with God which comes with obedience to this instruction.

Presented in this way, it is tempting to imagine that this life is constructed out of sheer observance of these commandments, that such observance creates the foundation upon which we might stand before God, or ties God to us. Perhaps it is possible to live such a life; certainly a great many have attempted it and we have all probably greatly benefited from such attempts.

But, in what looks like a direct parallel with Moses' delivery of the law and call of God, Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount immeasurably multiplies or intensifies or fills the space between the commandments: "You have heard that it was said... but *I* say to you..." For all of the appeal which Jesus the Teacher has for modern minds, in contrast to the dogmatized Jesus, in fact Jesus the teacher is a real hard-liner. Murder is not just about the knife but thinking about the knife; adultery is not about keeping your hands to yourself but about actually becoming aware that you probably ought to keep your hands to yourself.

In these examples, and many more which aren't listed, Jesus effectively makes it impossible to fulfil the law, to do or to be in the right way. But if it *is* impossible, this does not mean "don't try"; Jesus is serious here about the nature of murder, adultery, truth telling and whatever else he might have added to the list.

So where do we stand? How can we move, righteously?

The simple, and common, solution, is simply to let ourselves off the hook. This is to imagine that impossible is impossible and that we have done enough identifiable good to impress God or anyone else we think we need to impress.

Yet this does not deliver to us certainty, and the moral life is typically lived with a view to certainty. We will still wonder whether we have been wise enough, or strong enough, whether *our* "enough" corresponds to *God's* "enough". There is here, finally, really only uncertainty – before God and before each other; I cannot know in advance whether I will have a (moral) leg to stand on.

There is, then, no gospel heard here, only the kind of "have I done enough?" uncertainty which comes with any attempt to live a complex human life according to a moral code, whether that code be simple or complex.

The "...but I say to you..." on Jesus' lips is not the gospel; it is the signal that we *need* the gospel. We must keep in mind that those who hear these words – then and now – are told at the very beginning: blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. We are such ones when we learn the extent of the command of God and are stopped short by its impossibility. Then we stand

as those Jesus names: the unworthy poor in spirit; those who mourn or are meek – who are unable to effect for themselves the things they need. The blessedness of these ones is not in what they lack, but in that their only hope – the grace of God to provide – is promised them.

The intensity of Jesus' teaching continues in the passages which follows our text for today until, the end of chapter six, we hear, "Therefore I tell you, *do not worry*"! After declaring the righteous life to be significantly more difficult than any of us wants it to be, "Do not worry!" Why? Do not worry, for your heavenly Father knows what you need, you poor in spirit, you meek, you who thirst for righteousness, who long for mercy and peace.

Christian discipleship takes very seriously the call to a devout, holy, moral life. Jesus does not intensify the commandments to dismiss them; not one jot or tittle of the law is lost, he declares. Learning not to objectify others for our own ends or gratification, not to deceive or covet or envy – this is part of what it means to be in Christ.

It is just that "to be in Christ" is the *starting point* from which we enter into that renewed moral life. The first thing to seek is the kingdom of God and *God's* righteousness, and everything else God calls for is then added to us. The moral life, lived outside of this grace, leads to the crucifixion because it does not know the freedom of the children of God. The moral life which lives out of the resurrection leaves moral fear behind and lives forward out of gratitude for the gift of life we did not think to ask for. In this way our weekly, or daily, prayer begins to be answered: as in Jesus himself, so also in us, God's kingdom comes, earth begins to look a little more like heaven.

To come to Christian faith is to begin to realise that we already loved and desired by God as his children. This is not something we can earn; we can only have our eyes opened up to it.

This is a comfort, a righteousness, a mercy, a life we cannot rightly expect, and yet it is there for us to take.

Let us, then, choose life: the divinely command life of the free children of God, that we might enter ever more richly into the land, the life, which God promises.
