Lectio Divina – 7th Sunday of the Year A

Contexts

Matthew’s Gospel (in brief)

* Composed between 80-90 CE
* Author is anonymous, but named as ‘Matthew the tax collector’ by later tradition.
* Written in scholarly ‘synagogue’ Greek.
* Incorporates almost the entire Gospel of Mark, plus material from Q and material unique to Matthew.
* Structured around 5 major discourses (each ends with the phrase: “When Jesus had finished….”:
  + Prologue – chapters 1- 4 Genealogy, Nativity & Infancy
  + **1st: 5-7 Sermon on the Mount**
  + 2nd: 10 Missionary Discourse
  + 3rd: 13 Parable Discourse
  + 4th: 18 Community Discourse
  + 5th: 23-25 Apocalyptic Judgement Discourses
* May be a parallel for the 5 books of the Pentateuch - Jesus the new Moses.
* Jesus first words are ‘to fulfil all righteousness’.
* A handbook for Church leaders to assist them in teaching and preaching, worship, mission and polemic.
* 2 broad categories: discourse & narrative.
* The only Gospel to explicitly mention the ‘Church’ – Matthew is theologian of the church.
* Initially addressed to a Jewish-Christian audience – only late in the Gospel is there openness to Gentiles.
* Names Jesus as ‘Messiah’ at the very beginning and throughout the Gospel.

Matthew 5:38-48: things to notice

* We are reading from the Sermon of the Mount which begins with the Beatitudes – both the path and the fruit of our Christian journey, of our attempt to ‘repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand’ (‘repent’ – the idea of radical change/transformation).
* This Sunday’s Gospel flows directly from the end of last Sunday’s gospel. The words, “Jesus said to his disciples” have been added to the liturgical text to make it clear that Jesus is speaking to the disciples, but these words are not in the Gospel text itself.
* ‘his disciples’ – Jesus is addressing the same group to whom he addresses the beatitudes and last week’s reading.
* The Gospel continues with two more example texts each beginning with, “You have learnt how it was said……but I say this to you…’
* Remember that Matthew is unfolding the meaning of the verse ‘If your virtue goes no deeper than that of the scribes and Pharisees….’- Virtue or righteousness in the sense of being in right relationship with God and neighbour. This is a kind of ‘wake-up call/warning’ to the early Christian community and forms the background for the examples which follow.
* It is not a ‘skin deep’, outward compliance with/observance of the Law, but a deeply heart-felt response to the love of God and of neighbour.
* Both example texts are not taken from the Decalogue or Ten Commandments. The first is from Exodus 21:24 – *an eye for an eye*. It was originally designed to limit the exacting of revenge by going one step further – eg. ‘You break my fingers, I will break your arms’. However, the problem is that exacting even a proportionate degree of vengeance still leaves the warring parties as much at odds with each other as before. It resolves nothing.
* What Jesus suggests by applying the teaching of the Beatitudes about peace-making is a way of putting an end to a relentless cycle of violence.
* Note that what Jesus says applies to both the innocent and the guilty party. All are called to live by the Beatitudes even when you are grievously injured and ‘unjustly’ treated. Remember, Jesus is speaking to the disciples – the group of would-be followers.
* These words also offer us an insight into how God behaves. We may punish, exclude, execute, but God does not. Disciples must always act in the ‘image and likeness’ of God. Very challenging stuff, especially when we find ourselves to be victims.
* Notice that in each of the following examples about being hit on one cheek, someone wanting your tunic or asking you to go ‘the extra mile’ Jesus’ teaching removes the cause of dispute so that the situation does not become one which brings even greater harm in apparently ‘unjust’ situations.
* So the emphasis here is one how the disciple is to respond to life’s often unjust situations.
* In the next section of the reading Jesus commands us to love our enemies as God loves them. Easy to say, but hard to do. “God is as committed to the salvation of the wicked as to the just and we need to remember that we ourselves are the wicked or were wicked at some stage in our life and quite likely to become so again.” (M O’Brien)
* God’s salvation and love are offered but never imposed. O’Brien says, look at the ‘double slap’ in the first section. The other person may very well slap you again!!
* In the following verses Matthew evokes the image of God who bestows good things on righteous and unrighteous people alike.
* The behaviour of the disciple is to mirror the excessive behaviour of God in extending love, mercy and forgiveness to all (not just some). That is the way to perfection.

The Liturgical Context – why does the church choose this passage to reflect on this Sunday?

The Sunday Gospels up to Lent

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|  |  | First Reading | Second Reading | Gospel |
| 4th Sunday | Sermon on Mount 1 | Zephaniah  2:3, 3:12-13 | 1 Cor 1:26-31 | Matthew 5:1-12  Beatitudes: nearness of the Kingdom |
| 5th Sunday | Sermon on Mount 2 | Isaiah 58:7-10 | 1 Cor2:1-5 | Matthew 5:13-16  Salt & Light: discipleship |
| 6th Sunday | Sermon on Mount 3 | Sirach 15:15-20 | 1 Cor 2:6-10 | Matthew 5:17-37  The true meaning of the Law and virtue (righteousness) I |
| **7th Sunday** | **Sermon on Mount 4** | **Leviticus**  **19:1-2, 17-18** | **1 Cor 3:16-23** | **Matthew 5:38-48**  **The true meaning of the Law and virtue (righteousness) II** |
| 8th Sunday | Sermon on Mount 4 | Isaiah 49:14-15 | 1 Cor 4:1-5 | Matthew 6 24-34  Trust in God & set your heart on the kingdom |

As always, the first reading from Leviticus provides an introduction for the Gospel text. It is a call to holiness through being in right relationship with neighbour – called ‘brother’ in the text: Be holy, for I am holy. How? Do not bear anger or hatred for your brother; tell your neighbour of his offence; do not exact vengeance or bear grudges; love your neighbour as yourself. This is the way to true holiness.

**Reflection - Going the extra mile**

Vengeance, retaliation and violence seem part and parcel of the human experience. When we are hurt our first instinct is often to strike back, to take revenge on the one who hurt us - ‘pay back’, as we call it.

That’s how cycles of violence get started. These cycles can continue, between families for example, for generations, enduring long after the original incident has been forgotten.

In continuing his Sermon on the Mount in today’s Gospel, Jesus calls his disciples to a new way of handling violence and unjust treatment - not with revenge and retaliation, but with open-hearted generosity and forgiveness.

Jesus’ teaching must have sounded like the ravings of a mad man to his hearers. Even for us today that teaching can be ‘hard to swallow’. Is Jesus seriously asking us to offer the other cheek to the one who strikes us, to suffer double the injury? If someone wants our shirt, do we have to give them our coat as well? If someone forces us to go one mile, do we really have to go two miles with them? Love your enemies? Pray for those who persecute you? Seriously?

The challenge in Jesus’ words is for the disciples to always act in our dealings with one another as God would act. That is how we can break the cycles of violence which would otherwise entrap us.

Jesus calls his disciples to a more abundant righteousness even when they are unjustly treated. He takes traditional interpretations of the ancient biblical teachings and corrects and extends them in a more generous interpretation.

Virtue and righteousness are not about looking good on the outside, fulfilling the ‘letter of the Law’. They are about being good on the inside and acting for the good of others, allowing God’s heart to reign within our own. That’s what brings us into right relationship with God and neighbour.

True Christian virtue always goes beyond merely what is required. It is always willing to ‘go the extra mile’ in tolerance, love, forgiveness and mercy. It mirrors the excessive generosity of God.

The perfection of true holiness is found in acting towards others, including our enemies, as God acts towards us all.