

Matthew 5. 21- 37 Grovely Parish 16th February 2020

Great wisdom can sometimes come to us in the most unexpected ways and unexpected places. Let me share with you two of my favourite places where unexpected wisdom has come from.

I remember reading once that Karl Barth, who is considered the most influential theologian of the twentieth century, was once asked: "What is the message of the New Testament" and he replied: "It is the message of the children's hymn; "Jesus love me this I know, because the bible tells me so." Barth's great understanding of Christian theology could be expressed in one, memorable line. It is the message that, the New Testament, and the whole bible is the movement of God's love to us. One line of a children's hymn communicates that message with the simple words; "Jesus loves me this I know." A children's hymn is an unexpected place to find the message of the New Testament.

My second piece of unexpected wisdom comes from the 1958 musical, "South Pacific." You would not expect great wisdom to come from a musical, but I have always valued one particular song from that musical, called "You've got to be taught" The lyrics go:

You've got to be taught to hate and to fear.
You've got to be taught, from year to year.
You've got to be taught, to be afraid of people, who's eyes are
oddly made.
And people who's skin is a different shade.
You've got to be taught, to hate all the people, your relatives
hate.
You've got to be carefully taught.

The song confronts our capacity to allow prejudice, fear, and hatred, to control our thinking, and our lives. The song in its subtle way is challenging our thinking.

The song is suggesting we need to see people as people, and learn to value them, and to accept their differences.

It is a powerful piece of wisdom found in a most unexpected place.

This theme of unexpected wisdom, coming to us in unlikely places is a theme from today's gospel reading. When you first hear this gospel, you may think; this reading is too difficult, or maybe too naïveté. It's about topics we don't always want to hear about, like anger and hostility, divorce, and lust, and conflicts.

There is however embedded in this reading great wisdom, about how you should treat other people, and how to deal with conflict. The reading has a message for our lives and our times.

Let us look more carefully then at this reading, from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

In today's gospel reading Jesus is fulfilling the role of a new Moses, a new lawgiver. Jesus is pointing his hearers to the important Ten Commandments, particularly the commandments: You shall not murder: You shall not commit adultery: You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain.

However, in this part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is asking people, not only to remember the prohibitions against these actions, but also to think about the motives, and attitudes, which cause these behaviours to be committed in the first place.

Let us look firstly at Jesus' guidance about anger and conflict.

In his sermon, Jesus wants us to treat people differently. He wants us to change our attitude to others, and to stop the build up of hatred and hostility, which are the root cause of crimes like murder, and brutality.

In his sermon, Jesus is giving us a new way of relating to others. He is saying the anger, which you told against your brother or sister, and the belittling, and the name-calling, which you engage in, only builds up hostility and violence. It is something that is not appropriate, and should be stopped. Instead of this anger and hostility, Jesus is saying strive to live in harmony with your brother and sister, and with other people, strive to make peace with them.

Jesus even gives us an example of peace making. Imagine he says you are at the Temple in Jerusalem, and you are about to fulfil your obligations to God, by making an offering at the Temple altar. Jesus says, Stop what you are doing; you have a more important piece of work to do. You need to be reconciled with the one you are angry with. You need to make peace with him or her. The implication of Jesus' example is that being reconciled to someone is as much your religious obligations, as any other obligation his hearers may have at the Temple.

If you think striving to live in peace, and harmony with others is too difficult, or too demanding, let me tell you a story. When Apartheid was abolished in South Africa in 1994, and the Black South Africans obtained their full legal rights, many Black South Africans, who had been mistreated, and hurt by the former government, felt it was now their turn to seek revenge, and to engage in pay-back.

To his credit Desmond Tutu, the then Anglican Archbishop of South Africa gave strong moral leadership, and said, “No! Violence, and brutality and revenge are not the ways to follow. We need to be reconciled with each other.” At the encouragement of Archbishop Tutu, and with the support of the national government, “The Truth and Reconciliation Commission” was established, and those who had been hurt were given an opportunity to speak about their pain, as well as to receive compensation for what they had endured, while the courts dealt those who had committed crimes.

The Commission chaired by Archbishop Tutu, actively strove to bring reconciliation, and healing to the people of South Africa, and the Commission did do that. Peace did come to South Africa, because a Man of God remembered Jesus’ teaching about striving to live in harmony, and good will with others, even with those, who had caused you, and your family cruel hurt.

There is indeed wisdom in Jesus’ encouragement for people to stop feeding their anger and hostility, and to strive to engage in reconciliation and peace making.

There is much I could say about those other topics in his reading. But I could go for too long. Let me however just make these two points.

In his sermon, Jesus reminds his audience that they are responsible for their actions. They cannot blame others for their actions. While Jesus is using the language of exaggeration, when he says; “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off,” the implication of what he is saying is that you are responsible for your actions, and so you should be careful what you do.

You actions do have consequences.

Finally I would like to say something about Jesus' hesitance regarding divorce. I am aware the divorce is a highly emotive topic. It may sound harsh that Jesus speaks against divorce. But what Jesus is really speaking against is the abuse of women, which could happen in that strongly, patriarchal society. If a man, in that society, and at that time, wanted to divorce his wife, he needed only to say three times: "I divorce thee, I divorce thee, I divorce" in the presence of two male witnesses, and a certificate of divorce was given to the woman. The woman was then made homeless and destitute. She was thrown out onto the street. A woman however could not divorce her husband.

Jesus is showing compassion and concern for an important group in that society, who were often mistreated and abused, when he spoke against the arbitrary use of divorce.

Yes, this small section of the Sermon on the Mount has much to give to us. At its essence it is saying - value and respect others. Don't allow anger or hostility, or desire to control your behaviour. Instead strive to live in harmony with one another, and strive to value one another, and strive to give dignity to one another.

There is indeed great wisdom hidden in this unexpected reading.

Let us pray.

Lord, help us to learn from your wisdom.

Help us to work for peace and harmony in the every day activities of our days.

Help us not to allow small irritations, and annoyances to fester in our lives, instead help us to work for reconciliation. And help us to support those who are most vulnerable, and at risk in our society. We pray this in your Son's name. Amen