

SERMON: HOLY GOD – HOLY PEOPLE

Matt 5:21-37 1 Corinthians 3: 1-9 Deuteronomy 30; 15-end

Today our readings from scripture present us with a difficult message to hear and perhaps an even more difficult message to enact.

I love a cartoon I once read. It pictured Moses descending Mount Sinai looking crestfallen weighed down with the weight of the tablet of stone containing the ten commandments. He faced an eager and expectant crowd. Nervously he cleared his voice and read “The first commandment is this ‘thou shalt not shoot the messenger’”

Please bear this in mind today.

At first reading all three passages appear to be dire warnings to mankind about the folly of living sinful lives. But I want to maintain that they tell us more about the true holiness of God.

I well remember our last Chaplain recalling that the only time he suffered

from a bout of what the acting profession call 'corpsing', that is an controllable fit of giggles, was whilst conducting a service when he read that passage from Exodus about the ten commandments. He looked down on his small congregation, all none younger than in their 80's and some well into their 90's and read 'thou shalt not steal'. Now apart from being ex bankers and stockbrokers not too much risk of that. Then he got to 'thou shalt not covert thy neighbour's ox or donkey'. Pretty safe there also, not too many of those in South Kensington. But then he came to 'thou shall not commit adultery' and that was all too much for him and he broke down in fits of giggles.

But there was no giggling when in today's passage from Deuteronomy Moses spoke these words: "For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep all his commands, decrees and laws and then he went on:¹⁷ But if your heart turns away and

you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, ¹⁸ I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed”.

As I said earlier - a difficult message to hear, hard words to follow.

The gospel message this morning and the words of Jesus are contained within the passage of teaching we have come to know as the Sermon on the Mount. It is thought to be Jesus first major discourse.

Perhaps the most eagerly awaited speech in recent times was Mr Trump's inaugural day speech setting out his priorities and intentions for future US government policy. The whole world held its breath in anticipation.

What we have here in today's gospel message can arguably be described as part of Jesus's inaugural speech in which Matthew has gathered together his teaching and plan which was equally eagerly awaited by his disciples and those

gathered around him. But whereas Trump's speech was nothing new, only repeating that which he had aired on his campaign trail, Jesus message was revolutionary. He took the earlier law given to Moses, laws which the Scribes and Pharisees boasted that they followed assiduously. But now he 'mined down' behind those words, not changing a dot or tittle of the law, as our Chaplain reminded us last week, but rather illuminating what murder, adultery, divorce, oaths really meant. Not just enacting the law by actions but rather to move the law on to uncover the emotions, the attitudes and the thoughts that we harbour one for another and in so doing illuminate the kingdom ethics.

In future it was not just to be the killing of another that broke the law but as Jesus said' " But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister^[bc] will be subject to judgment also'" I guess there is not one of us here today who has not

fallen foul of that particular sin at some time in our lives.

Or again “you shall not commit adultery
²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” I won’t ask you to raise your hand this morning if that is your particular vice!

This was revolutionary thinking. All those who had previously thought they were living within the law and without sin were to be rudely awakened to the truth. None is without sin. No wonder the scribes and Pharisees were so upset by this teaching and set out to destroy Him.

But you know we did not really need today’s readings to convict us of our sin and our unworthiness to stand before God. Our consciences had done a jolly good job of that already. But today’s reading from the gospels certainly tell us of the extent and depth of that sin.

But for me that is not the only purpose of these readings, maybe not the most important either. It's like looking at a coin. On the one side this teaching illustrates for us the depth and range of our sin. But if you turn the coin to the flip side you find the head of the Monarch revealed. Just so with these readings. Looked at from the other side we can start to see just how holy God is. Looked at from the other side we see that sin is a complete anathema to Him. It is the complete opposite to true holiness. As our readings say today 'God is truly holy'. The psalmist tell us this again and again⁵ Exalt the LORD our God; worship at his footstool! Holy is he! And again:' Let them praise your great and awesome name! Holy is he!'

But it is not enough just to recognise God's holiness but we are told early in the scriptures in the book of Leviticus

"Speak to all the congregation of the sons of Israel and say to

them, 'You **shall** be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.'

Okay congregation of Holy Trinity no ifs, no buts in that command. If we are his people we must be holy, living holy lives. Holiness is not an option it should be our default position.

So, I believe we are left with two questions. What does it mean for us to be holy? And how do we strive to reach that level of holiness?

As Jesus has taught us from this passage holiness does not originate from our bodies. It is nothing to do with how well we legalistically follow law, or how loudly or long we pray, or how much we give to charity in a public and ostentatious way, or how long we boast we can fast. All things the Pharisees were good at doing. Holiness can best be described as finding ourselves in that unique relationship with God. A relationship that He has already

pre-ordained. Setting us apart, dedicated to Him—You see we belong to God in and through Christ. And in Christ, we are already holy.(I will say that again) God's holiness becomes our holiness . That is what it means to be holy.

But that leaves us with my second question how do we truly mirror that flip side of the coin in our lives how do we then practice holiness? Well as I have already suggested it starts with nothing that we are responsible for. Rather it starts with something God has already done for us through sending us His son and his son the cross. It starts with us being truly repentant for our unholy lives and accepting the gift of salvation earned for us by Jesus on that cross. As we have said in Christ and through Christ we became holy. But, it does require us to leave behind and turn our back on those old attitudes, those old emotions, those old actions of sin of which the gospel has

spoken. And It means from that point on following obediently, (and that is the word that Moses used in our O.T. reading,) obediently the promptings of the Holy Spirit no matter how much a personal sacrifice.

I have a good friend named Roy. His level of obedience was to be severely test some years back. He had just secured a good job in the secular world when he was called by God to apply for a job as warden and director of a small obscure Christian retreat tucked away in the depth of darkest Wales. It was the last job that he wanted to do. I am not sure that he even believed at that time in the concept of retreats . But, he was obedient to God's strange calling. It did not start very well as his removal van got stuck as it tried to make the steep ascent to the centre and the van had to be reluctantly and rather symbolically dragged to the centre by tractor the next day. But from that time on God has done some amazing things from

that center . Many conversions, many healings. People now travel from all over the world to that remote spot. And from that centre a network of 'houses of prayer' have been established which now stretch worldwide. Roy's Obedience to God has led, in turn, to holy lives and holy places.

The 19th century hymn writer Reginald Heber had a blessed life. The son of a wealthy land owner in my native county of Shropshire. Having graduated from Oxford he was given the Rectortship of his Father church in Hodnet and he could have continued to lead a comfortable life in that capacity. But he was obedient and responded to a move of the Spirit and went to serve as Bishop of Calcutta well before the days of Mother Teressa. His health was not to survive more than 3 years in that place before his death but not before he had composed and left us the beautiful hymn we will singing shortly Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God Almighty.

So, what is the call of obedience we are being called to today? What are we being convicted to leave behind in our old lives as we walk that holy walk? What small things are being asked of us in response to that wonderful, that awesome gift of grace and love that we have received from our Father through Jesus.

I will leave us all with those questions to answer for ourselves but I will also leave you with some final words of St Peter on this very subject. He wrote:

‘13 Therefore, gird your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the **grace** that was brought to you at the **revelation of Jesus Christ**.

14 As **obedient** children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, 15 but like the Holy One who called you, **be holy** yourselves also in all your behaviour; 16 because it is written, “**You shall be holy, for I am holy.**”

