

## Sermon Ordinary Sunday 7/Sexagesima Year C 2022

One of the common misconceptions in the efforts to try and understand our Lord - who he is and why is important – is to see him simply as a great moral teacher. According to some modernist attempts to construct a Jesus ‘acceptable’ to contemporary man, the miraculous and the supernatural need to be stripped away, so that we can then get to a ‘genuine’ historical Jesus, a Jesus before his legacy was corrupted and distorted by later generations. The trouble with these efforts is that, firstly, they leave us with a Jesus simply not worth believing in and certainly not able to save us. And, more critically, these reconstructionist efforts are just pure fantasy! It is simply not possible to construct a Jesus without reference to the miraculous and supernatural. To do so simply means doing so much damage to the record that bears witness to him – namely the New Testament - as to make both the record worthless, but also the fanciful reconstructions worthless.

As I mentioned earlier, I have proposed the new book by Greg Sheridan as our Lent study text. Sheridan addresses head on in his book the importance of taking the scriptural record at face value, on its own terms, and not imposing a certain scholarly or philosophical template over it to try and make it say things it was never intended to say. We can only understand the person and work of Jesus if we accept what the New Testament says about Jesus. Sheridan pointedly says that so many recent efforts to get to the ‘real Jesus’, however, would be like trying to investigate the cause of the 2019 fire at Notre dame de Paris but not to allow any documentation in French! But that is exactly how some people wish to approach Jesus. We’ll investigate his life and why it is important, but we won’t take seriously the principal record that bears witness to him.

Now, CS Lewis, in his typical, sharp observations, said that – based on the record - saying Jesus was a good moral teacher is actually the one thing you cannot say about him. Lewis argued that he was *trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something*

worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. ... Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God. In short, Lewis's point was that no ordinary human making such claims as Jesus did could possibly be rationally or morally reliable, unless the claim were true.

Now, it's helpful to lay all that out once more, because the idea of Jesus as 'the good man', the great moral teacher, is a tenacious one. It's incredibly resilient. But it keeps Jesus at arm's length and it hollows the gospel of its content. And sometimes, even people of sincere faith, feel somewhat embarrassed or awkward about the bold claims made for Christ. And we think perhaps Jesus who inspires us, Jesus who imparts good moral lessons, is a good entry level to faith for unbelievers.

Now, those who seek to construct a Jesus without reference to the divine, the miraculous or the supernatural frequently turn to a text such as we have in the gospel placed before us today and say, *Aha! There you have it! The true, pure kernel of Jesus! None of that stuff about angels and miraculous births. None of that stuff about claiming to be divine and resurrections. None of this superstitious nonsense about exorcisms or healings. Here we have the pure unadulterated Jesus. The good Jesus teaching us to be good!*

But I am afraid it is not nearly as simple as that. These exhortations by our Lord are not simply humanist proposals about how to live a good life. They are based on his understanding of God. They are theological arguments. These examples of ethical behaviour only emerge from a faith in God, from a sense of divine order and divine law. In other words, none of these sayings of Our Lord make sense - in fact are not possible - without reference to his faith and understanding of God. These statements on how to live the good life can only be made in reference to God.

Now, at the outset, it is important to note that these sayings are *not* addressed to the crowds. In Luke's gospel here, these sayings are directed to *the disciples*, to those who already believe in and who follow Jesus. These sayings, then, are to be *the mark* of those who believe. They are *not* universalist in appeal.

The sayings put to us today centre on two key ideas, and well known to us: love of one's enemies and generosity in giving. It is not enough to love those who love us or to give to those who can be expected to reciprocate. Such love and such giving, we hear, are no greater than those of sinners, (reinforcing the higher demands Christ makes of his disciples. This is not a universalist principle.) Our Lord proposes that love cannot remain just a matter of attitude, it must be translated into action, what the gospel here calls 'doing good.' The primary way of 'doing good' is to give to others, especially those in need. And so, concern for the poor and vulnerable and the sharing of goods, are key markers of an authentic Christian ethic.

In these matters Jesus provides a rule of thumb: we must do to others as we would have them do to us. But the norm – and here's the sticking point, here's where the universalist approach gets unstuck, and where the 'Jesus as good moral teacher' gets further unstuck – the norm is *God's own goodness*. Our love is because of God's love. Our generosity is because of God's generosity. Our seeking to do good is because of God's goodness. And not because goodness *comes* from God. *God is goodness!* Not because love *comes* from God. But because *God is love*. In our goodness, our mercy, our generosity we are in fact just expressing the merciful love of God. And this is why a lived Christian ethic of goodness and love and mercy - both in the individual and in the church - is so rich in evangelical potential: it communicates *the very truth* of God himself! The wisdom of the church is that we do not just proclaim *in word* the love, mercy and generosity of God. We live it! We do not just proclaim *in our worship* the love, mercy and generosity of God. We en-flesh it in our very person.

The ethical sayings of our Lord are certainly important. They *are* an attractive feature of our Lord's ministry, even if at times confronting, challenging and difficult. They provide an important standard by which Christians should try to shape and direct their lives. But they only make sense in reference to faith in God. The ethical life which allows for justice, mercy, forgiveness, generosity only emerges from a sense of the transcendent and a belief in the truth of divine law. The claims that a full ethical and moral life can be lived without reference to God, despite loud protestations, sound increasingly hollow. The gospel of Jesus Christ does not need improving. The person of Jesus Christ does not need to be recovered. Accept the record of him at face value, and we will discover the truth of his claims. Live a moral life according to Christ's own words, and we will reveal something of the truth of God himself. Amen.