

And so our movement through the Scriptures has brought us into the Sermon on the Mount. Actually Nancy started us there two weeks ago when she talked about our commission to be the salt of the earth & the light of this world. And we've talked the last couple of weeks about **the prophetic tradition** that Jesus walked in - Jesus carrying the passion of the prophets for justice, mercy, faithfulness, & God's heart for the poor & the oppressed. The Sermon on the Mount - which is chapters 5, 6 & 7 from the gospel of Matthew, has been described as the heart of the heart of Jesus' teachings & the key to Christian discipleship - the key to what it really means to follow Jesus. It is **the biggest sustained block** of teaching by Jesus to be found anywhere in the NT. And we know from the research of scholars that it was the **most quoted section** of the Bible by the church, & in church writings, for the **1st 300 years** of church history. It was for the church in those first few centuries, the **go-to section** of the Bible for understanding how Jesus wanted us to live in this world.

The Sermon on the Mount has inspired countless Christians down through the ages to live lives of greater courage, greater love, greater service & greater sacrifice. People like Francis of Assisi, Leo Tolstoy, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa & even great leaders like Mahatma Gandhi - they built their lives around the central tenets of the SOM.

And yet - **we have a problem**. When we look back on the last **1700 years** of christian history, instead of seeing a church always inspired and empowered & living out these teachings of Jesus - all too often we see a church that at many points in history has acted in ways contrary to the teachings of Jesus - instead, using power to oppress others, & falling into **judgementalism & persecution** of those who disagreed with it, & being prepared to use **violence** against those it considered **heretics**, and even to go to **war** with those it regarded as **enemies**.

So today - and I realise I'm taking on a big, big issue - I want to wrestle with why this has happened, when we have this extraordinarily **powerful & beautiful & clear teaching** from Jesus right under our noses, how has the church still so often ended up doing almost the **exact opposite** of what Jesus taught us, at so many points in its history?

As I've already said, for the first **300 years** of the church's existence, the Sermon on the Mount was looked to as the clearest place to learn **how Jesus wanted us to live** our lives in this world. But then, things start to go wrong, or at least get very complicated. The first big things that changes is that the Roman Emperor **Constantine** gets converted & he starts **inviting church leaders & theologians** to help him run his Empire. But its hard to run an Empire & the greatest **military force** the world has ever seen & at the same time be confronted by Jesus' teachings & the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus says things like: we should **love our enemies** - rather than conquer and enslave them; its hard to build the wealthiest Empire the world has ever seen, when the Sermon on the Mount says to **give away your wealth**, & to care for the poor. And so from this time on, the Sermon on the Mount in specific, & Jesus' words overall, begin to get pushed to the side - even by the church. And instead, **debates over church doctrine** & how this mighty institution should structure itself start to become more important than talking about **simple obedience** to the teachings of Jesus. Its about this time that Christians begin - encouraged by the Emperor, & financed by the rich - begin to build more & more elaborate **church buildings**, & temples & Cathedrals. Up until this time, Christians have largely just been meeting in small groups in each others homes, & when they were being persecuted, underground, in catacombs & the like.

Now this is **shocking & deeply disturbing**, but from this time on, theologians more & more start trying to explain why the Sermon on the Mount **doesn't** apply & ***cant be lived out***. You see the shift here - for the first 300 years the Sermon on the Mount is **the** text Christians used for saying this is how we live our lives in the world as followers of Jesus; and from about **300 CE** on, theologians start spending more & more of their time explaining why we **can't** obey Jesus' teachings in the SOM.

Well how did that **logic** work? There were three or four arguments used by thinkers to try & sideline Jesus' teachings & move them away from a central position. But really, it was all about holding onto the **power & the wealth** that the church has acquired once it was coopted by the Emperor & the Roman Empire.

1. **One** argument used was that these teachings of Jesus were '**hard teachings**', far too hard for normal Christians; & so they were only actually meant for super christians, like monks & nuns, not for ordinary folk. A 'don't try this one at home' kind of line.

2. Another line of thinking that was used to side line Jesus' teachings, was to say that they were all about life in the **Kingdom of Heaven**; but as we don't live in heaven yet, & we live on earth, therefore Jesus' teachings don't apply yet - they'll apply at a later date.

3. A very similar approach to that, was a line of thinking called '**dispensationalism**' (technical term) tried to say that the Sermon on the Mount didn't apply to our lives now in this age, and wouldn't apply until the dawn of a future golden age called "**the millennium**", an idea which is kind of referred to in the book of Revelation, sort of, vaguely. So again, the idea here is that the teachings of Jesus are just too hard, so rather than try & live them out, lets just say they don't apply yet.

4. There were also some in the **Protestant** tradition who said "look the central message of the Bible is bought to us by **Paul**, not Jesus - & its when Paul says that we are saved by faith not works". And because in the SOM Jesus seems to be talking a lot about good works, it doesn't count anymore. **Jesus has been superseded by Paul.**

So how certain theologians managed to come to conclusions like that seems baffling to me. In one of the passages Chris read to us earlier, it looks to me like Jesus is making it crystal clear that he wants us to not just hear his words, but to **put them into practice**. In **Matt 7:24-29**, Jesus concludes the SOM by comparing those who hear his words & put them into practice to wise master-builders, those who build their houses on foundations so solid, so strong, that no matter what storms life throws at them, their lives will stand firm.

In contrast, those who only hear Jesus' teachings - perhaps even hear & agree with them, but don't put them into practice, their lives will have a really **flimsy, shifting foundation**, & when hard times come (& hard times always will come) - they will struggle. You read this passage, & there is no hint here of Jesus telling us we can put off obeying his teaching until some future heavenly occasion.

And of course, down through history, there have always **been people** who believed that Jesus' teachings were given to be lived out in the **here & now**. And rather than seeing them as hard teachings, as **a harsh new law** that's will crush us if we fall under it, they instead saw these as

beautiful principles that are designed to **set us free** (not imprison us). Now there are certainly parallels between the Law of Moses & the teachings Jesus gives us here. **Moses goes up a Mountain** to receive the 10 commandments, whereas Jesus leads his disciples up a mountain to describe his fulfilment of the law of Moses. But unlike the laws that Moses brought, the SOM is not a long list of **thou shalt's & thou shalt not's**. Instead the SOM is a series of **transforming practices** that have the power to break us out of our cycles of destructive behaviour & set us free from our addictions. Now remember this phrase **transforming practices**, because we are going to come back to it again a little bit later, & it's a key phrase for understanding what Jesus is doing here.

For in these three chapters, Jesus gives us keys for breaking free from all kinds of things that imprison us - **anger, greed, lust, manipulative speech, violence, anxiety, judgementalism, hypocrisy versus authentic spirituality**.

So there's so much **transformational power** here in these three chapters of Matthew alone, that this could change our world - ***if applied***. For example - Jesus' teaching about greed & not needing to store up more & more wealth for ourselves, imagine if that teaching was taken to heart by the executives of some of the big multinational employers like **Mondelez International** who own Cadbury's - some of whom probably are Christians - imagine if they as an industry were truly committed to following the teachings of Jesus & were prepared to put people ahead of profits, & the well-being of a whole community ahead of the returns to their individual shareholders & executives. What if they as a company were, & as individuals, were content with enough, rather than always more & more? I mean, it's not as if they are struggling - this is a company that had revenue of \$30 billion dollars in their last reported year. And indeed, Cadburys was originally a Quaker family who did live out the values of the SOM, & were deeply committed to the welfare of their workers & community.

So you can see, there is so much in these three chapters of Matthew, & we can't cover them all today - we are only going to look at one of them today & the rest we'll come back to at other times through this year.

The Scripture we are going to look at more closely today is the first one Chris read to us, from **Matthew 5:21-24 READ**.

By the way, that term of abuse *Raca*, which is Aramaic, most commentators translate as 'empty head'. But one commentary I read said that the root word **Rac** meant spit, & the best way to translate this phrase was as "You little piece of **spit**". Which, as a term of abuse, is pretty good isn't it!

You know, the last few weeks in my own Scripture study times, I've been reading my way through the books of **Exodus & Leviticus**. And when you read those books, one of the things that leaps out & smacks you between the eyes is the amount of space given to instructions on how the people of God are to construct the **tabernacle**, the big tent-like structure for worship, that was the fore-runner of the temple under Solomon. I mean really, in those early books of the OT you have chapter after chapter & verse after verse giving you every tiny detail on how the tabernacle was to be built, down to the details on how the **curtain hooks** were to be made. There are detailed instructions on how the **altar** is to be made, & with what kind of stones, & how those stones are to be fashioned. And there are incredibly detailed instructions on how the **offerings** are to be offered on those altars, all given to please & appease God. The amount of detail & specification is mind boggling actually. And the impression is given, & given strongly, that the

worshippers have to get the all these details absolutely right & correct, or God will not accept their worship or their offering.

And then along comes Jesus. The Word made flesh; the light of the world; the living water; King of Kings & Lord of Lords. The highest & clearest **revelation** of God that human eyes could see, that human ears could hear, & that the human mind behold, with-out being blown apart by God's glory & purity & power. And if this is the case, these words we have from Jesus in the gospels are words that we should be devouring, pouring over & doing our level best to understand & live out, not dismissing them or sidelining them, or saying they're secondary to Paul's teachings, or secondary to what certain theologians have written. Jesus himself said in John's gospel **"If you keep my teachings, you will really be my disciples; & then you will know the truth & the truth shall set you free"** and **"if the Son sets you free, you will be truly free indeed."** *And who among us doesn't want to be free?*

And one of the strange things about Jesus here in the gospels is that he has so little to say about God's **temple** or God's altars. In the OT, the text is obsessive with detail about the tabernacle & then the temple. In the NT, Jesus says hardly anything about the physical temple - except for that strange prophesy that Jesus didn't rebut, that the temple is going to be **destroyed & three days later replaced with something far more powerful & beautiful & lasting (Mark 16:21)**. Which is of course his resurrected body, & in the NT the Body of Christ is the relationships that exist between each of us & us with our risen Lord, this becomes the structure that holds everything together. Its no longer about bricks & mortar - the focus shifts to **relationships**.

And here in this passage - what does Jesus say about the **altar** of God? He says if you have come to offer a gift on that altar, & then remember that your relationship with a brother or sister is not right, & that you have wronged them, or they have something against you - drop everything, leave your gift - **& go & repair that relationship**. You see what's happened here? We've moved from the OT with its obsessive focus on every minute detail of how the temple should be built - to the NT, & its obsessive focus - not on how a **religious building** should be constructed, but on how **right relationships with each other** should be constructed. For under the new covenant, we, flesh & blood, are the new temple that Jesus is building.

Imagine how different church history would be if we had fully understood this & taken it seriously? Imagine if all the millions & millions of dollars that had been poured into the construction of elaborate **church buildings & temples & Cathedrals over the last 1700 years**, had instead been used to go into all the world & make disciples, to feed the poor and heal the sick, to care for widows & orphans & the lonely & the broken? And imagine if all the energy that had been poured into building those churches & temples had been poured instead into helping people build **right & loving relationships** with one another, or **get free from addictions**? Imagine how many broken relationships & **marriages** could have been saved, how many **split churches** could have been saved, how many failed projects & how many **businesses** could have been saved, how many **feuds & vendettas** & murders could have been prevented, how many **wars** could have been stopped - & I'm not exaggerating when I say that - because down through the centuries thousands of lives have been lost in wars between Catholics & Protestants. And Jesus wept.

One of the really precious things we have here at Leith, that I really love, is that we are such a broad & diverse community here. We have people here in our community who are **top theologians & thinkers**. We have people in our community who would describe themselves as

Charismatic, & many from **Pentecostal** backgrounds. We have many who would describe themselves as **evangelical** & others who would describe themselves as **progressive**; we have folk here who's expression of worship is very **contemplative**; & others who are passionate about the **environment & social justice**; we even have some people here who are **Presbyterians** - seriously we do! But this diversity is beautiful, & to be guarded. Because whatever label we might put on ourselves or others, we are together working out what it means to **follow Jesus**, & helping each other to do that.

Ok you'll remember earlier I used that **phrase a "Transforming practice"** to describe the principal that Jesus is trying to teach us here through-out the Sermon on the Mount. I'm indebted to David Gushee & Glenn Stassen, who in 2003 wrote a wonderful book called **Kingdom Ethics**, in which they outlined this powerful **pattern** in Jesus' teachings in Matthew.

Here's how this pattern works: in **14 distinct places** through the **SOM**, Jesus does this really interesting thing. Its **a three step process**. First of all he reminds us what the old law or traditional thinking says about a certain ethical issue. So in this case, he reminds us that Moses' laws says **'You shall not kill'**; and then as the **2nd step** he shows us how that law or tradition on its own is not enough to break us out of a viscous cycle that we are stuck in. So in this case he says even when people keep the law against killing, they still get angry, & hate on other people, & abuse them calling them things like you fool, or you idiot, or you little piece of spit! So even while obeying the letter of the OT law, 'thou shalt not kill', we are still **stuck with a world of hate & abuse**. So we haven't been set free yet, & Jesus wants to set us free, & move us towards a community of forgiveness & love.

So then in the crucial **3rd step**, Jesus tell us what the transforming practice is, what that thing is that we need to do - not just think about or pray about, but do - if we are going to be free from imprisoning cycles of mutual anger, hate & abuse. **Go & be reconciled** to your brother or sister if they have anything against you. Because God isn't interested in our worship or our offering until we've done that.

Now this is actually a hard teaching for many of us - because if you are anything **like me**, you **won't like hard conversations**, & you won't like conflict. And if you are anything like me, you'll prefer to avoid conflict rather than resolved it. And most NZers are conflict avoiders I think. But I have learned the hard way that **conflict unresolved doesn't go away** or magically resolve itself, but it festers, & grows, & gets worse - & we do get stuck in this **vicious cycle of anger & unhappiness** that Jesus actually wants to set us free from. But it doesn't have to be this way.

A couple of years ago Lynne Baab & I ran a **workshop** here at Leith on **listening skills** - on listening to God & listening to each other. And as part of that, I introduced a model of conflict resolution that I have found incredibly helpful, which I'll call **Empathy Based Communication**. And this approach is based on the insight that most conflict is about **unmet needs**, and that to resolve conflict we all need to move from places of **blame** - either of self or of others, to places of empathy, both for ourselves & for others. Its a great tool, & intend for us to do another workshop on it this year, & am really happy to chat about it with anyone who'd like to find out more.

But one thing I have learned, & its that **unresolved conflict will eat away at us & destroy us**, both as individuals & as a community. It is something we have to learn how to deal with & process.

Last week I shared a little about learning to deal with **disappointment** in my life, & how I had to open up that room of my life & let Jesus deal with it.

But I also had to learn how to deal with **unresolved conflict & anger**. Some of you will know this story, but in 2010 when Susan & I returned from Cambodia, where we had spent 16 years training locals & setting up health projects that were ministering to hundreds of the poorest of the poor in slums & squatter areas. Well about six months after Susan & I got back to NZ, we heard the news much of what had set up in Cambodia had began to collapse, because the Director of the NGO we'd set up, in cahoots with the Chair of the Board were **misusing funds**. Now this became a long & drawn out battle over the next couple of years which is such a long story I haven't got time to describe it here today - other than to say, **in my heart I allowed anger & eventually bitterness to take over**. But that did me far more damage that it did to them, & so eventually God got it thru my thick skull that I had to learn how to forgive those two men, even to the point I could pray for God's blessing on their lives.

So this is where the power to break the **cycles** that imprison us, & the **addictions** the enslave us - this is where the power comes from - its when we **allow the power of the Risen Jesus to come & take over**, & to give us the power to put the teachings of Jesus into practice. It is true, we can't do it in our own strength. And so as we finish our service this morning, lets pray for the Spirit of Jesus to move in a fresh way amongst us, to empower us to be disciples, & to live as genuine followers of Jesus' teachings.

Let's Pray