

Year A

Matthew 5:21-37

David Livingstone is renowned as one of the greatest missionaries of all time. He was among the first to explore Africa, driven by a passionate desire to end the slave trade. Livingstone was convinced that by opening up the continent he could expose slavery for the evil it was. When he died he was greatly loved in both Africa and England. His heart was buried in Africa and his body returned to England, where he was given a hero's funeral. The gravestone read "brought by

faithful hand over land and sea, David Livingstone: missionary, traveller, philanthropist. For thirty years his life was spent in an unwearied effort to evangelise the native races, to explore the undiscovered secrets and abolish the slave trade.”

Yet it is easy to focus on Livingstone the “saint” without recognising that he was an ordinary human being facing normal human struggles. Before he found his life’s work Livingstone met with a lot of “dead ends”. He initially entered medical college in response to a call for medical missionaries to China, but by the time his training was complete the

Opium Wars had begun and the door to China was closed. He then settled on South Africa, having met a missionary already at work there, Robert Moffat. Moffat had a mission station 600 miles north of Capetown, and had told Livingstone that it glowed in the morning sun with “the smoke of a thousand villages where no missionary had been before.” Unfortunately, when Livingstone arrived he discovered Moffat had been exaggerating. Rather than the smoke of a thousand villages Moffat had less than 40 converts, of whom half had returned to their

pre-Christian ways, and the surrounding countryside was destitute of people.

Disillusioned with Moffat's mission station Livingstone then set out to establish his own missionary work. Over the course of ten years he established a string of mission stations, but had only one convert, who eventually returned to paganism.

This caused Livingstone to rethink his vocation, and it was only after all these setbacks that he finally embarked on his great journeys of exploration.

Not only did Livingstone face many setbacks before finding his vocation, he also suffered

many character defects. While he loved the native Africans and got along well with them, he found it almost impossible to get along with his fellow Europeans. He fought with fellow missionaries, fellow explorers, assistants, and even his brother Charles. He held grudges for years, could explode with rage and later in life had a serious falling out and parting of the ways with his original mission organisation, the London Missionary Society. Livingstone was a great Christian missionary, a man who did so much good in his life and yet a man who clearly struggled to live the way that Jesus intended for him.

All of us are exactly the same. The Gospel text today is not easy to read because it confronts us with our weaknesses and our failures.

It is important to note that when Jesus addressed the issue of fidelity in marriage and the issue of divorce that he addressed the man. It is the man and not the woman who must take responsibility. This is in marked contrast to the status quo in the Middle East. The following brief article appeared in *The Daily Telegraph* recently.

“Egypt is the worst country in the Arab world to be a woman, according to a poll of gender

experts which found high levels of sexual harassment and female genital mutilation as well as an increase in violence and Islamist sentiment following the 2011 revolution.

Hopes that the Arab Spring would improve the lot of women in Egypt have not only been confounded, their situation has in fact worsened, the survey by the Thomson Reuters Foundation suggested. It cited instability and conflict in the country as well as the rise of Islamist groups in many areas as some of the reasons for that deterioration.

Discriminatory laws as well as a surge in

trafficking had also had a negative impact, experts said.

"We removed the Mubarak from our presidential palace but we still have to remove the Mubarak who lives in our minds and in our bedrooms," Egyptian columnist Mona Eltahawy said, referring to Egypt's ousted military ruler, Hosni Mubarak.

"As the miserable poll results show, we women need a double revolution, one against the various dictators who've ruined our countries and the other against a toxic mix of culture and religion that ruin our lives as women."

Iraq came in as the second worst Arab nation for women's rights, with the Middle Eastern country now more dangerous for females than it was under toppled dictator Saddam Hussein, the study indicated. Both outstripped Saudi Arabia, the Gulf state notorious for repressive attitudes towards women under its strict Wahabi Islamic law. It came in as the third worst country for women, followed by Syria and Yemen.”¹

The culture that Jesus challenged still exists today and the kingdom that Jesus brings

¹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/10443462/Egypt-worst-Arab-country-to-be-a-woman-study-says.html>

must continue to challenge it. The problem is not confined to the Middle East it is found in all sorts of different ways throughout the world. The radical edge of God's kingdom challenges male pride and demands accountability. But of course, the challenge here is not exclusively directed at men. Jesus began by addressing the issue of anger and its implications for our relationships. Anger in itself is not wrong. It is a natural human emotion that may be justifiable. However, if it is not dealt with it will fester and destroy. There are some people who are permanently angry. These people tend not to

be healthy individuals. It is not good to sit in anger. At the heart of the Lord's Prayer are the words; 'Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors'. The two sides of the sentence are in balance. We cannot expect to receive forgiveness if we are not willing to forgive as well. Yet, we find this teaching to be very difficult, maybe even too difficult to live. You cannot make yourself forgive. You can try to muster it up but it will not come. The harder you try the greater the image of the betrayal against you becomes. Isn't that right? So how do we make sense of this? Jesus has called us to be salt and light in this world: to

live the way of the kingdom in the world. It is no good to throw up our hands in despair and to say, 'Well, I can't do it!' So what is the answer? Well, I think it is found in the little word, 'altar' that occurs in verses 23 and 24. Do not bring your sacrificial gift to the altar until you have been reconciled with your enemy. We have a radically different scenario now in Christ. Whilst we still are encouraged to do all that we can to effect reconciliation there is now an answer to the problem we are all plagued with. How do we deal with those situations that we cannot change? Only in Christ can we hope to find

the solution and it is before his altar that we find it. The Oxford Movement transformed worship within the Church of England in the 19th century. The importance of the sacrament was recognised and Christians were called to regularly take of bread and wine in Holy Communion. Communion was not for those who were special but for those who needed to receive forgiveness every day. And when the Christians left the Table they were encouraged to serve the poor. The bread of the altar became the bread for the poor. Those who received God's grace to deal with what they could not change in their own

lives were freed to help to bring change in the lives of their needy neighbours. And that was a model of Christian discipleship that worked because it was firmly anchored in the kingdom teaching of Jesus.

Clement of Alexandria wrote the following:

“For the sake of each of us he laid down his life--worth no less than the universe. He demands of us in return our lives for the sake of each other.” It is in the daily working out of our relationships that we find the demands of the kingdom most directly upon us. May we know God’s help as we seek to live faithfully.

