

# **Year A**

## **Matthew 5:38-48**

If I give to everyone who begs, I will have nothing left for myself. If I turn the other cheek, I will get slapped again. If I get sued, I am hiring the best lawyer I can afford to find a loophole in my favour. If I love my enemies, I will be more persecuted or even killed. If I am too nice, I will be seen as weak, a pushover, a doormat. Who wants to be perfect anyway? We all know this passage in the Sermon on the Mount very well. Some of the phrases first encountered in the

Authorised Version of the Bible have come down into contemporary English: “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”; “turn the other cheek”; “go the extra mile”. The perfect rhythm and balance in the poetry seems sufficient; surely we’re not meant to take the content seriously, are we? Maybe, you’re hoping I’m going to let you all off this morning! For that has certainly been a tactic of the church through the ages. This is simply Jesus’ advice or this is the impossible goal that is set for us. Simply look to it and do the best you can. Maybe even we suspect that Jesus might be simply wrong, but would

never say that. So we might try to explain Jesus' words away. Jesus was setting forth a set of values to which we might aspire. They are impossible but that's the point. By striving to attain them, we will live better than we would otherwise. Jesus' words reveal how impossible human righteousness is and so prepares us for the advent of grace. Jesus was speaking to an old world aspirationally. None of this will hold in the new world. Jesus offered pragmatic advice to bring empowerment to the oppressed and so when you cannot force people to act justly, you can expose the injustice of the

situation. When striking back will get you hurt, confront the aggressor without retaliating. When your debts are out of control, show how your poverty leaves you without protection. When your employer demands your labour, put them in an embarrassing position by going beyond conventional expectations. But isn't it demeaning of Christ to make those assumptions when Matthew's Gospel repeatedly insists that Jesus meant exactly what he said: to follow Jesus means to do what he asks? "You have heard that it is said, but I say to you...."

Jesus makes this personal. And that doesn't mean that he dumps an unbearable load onto each one of us. Instead he wants us to begin with himself. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God (John 1:1)." Jesus is the Word.

Map making goes by the name of cartography. It may not sound terribly interesting, but in 1815 a cartographer by the name of William Smith produced a map that changed the world. William Smith was an English orphan who grew up in poverty. He became a surveyor and during his time

surveying the countryside he came to realise something very important about the earth beneath his feet. First he discovered that rocks could be dated by the fossils found in them. Find the same type of fossils in two rocks separated by distance and it's probably they come from the same era. Second, he learned that the rock layers tend to be arranged in a consistent pattern. Armed with that knowledge Smith produced a geological map of England, Scotland and Wales. And that map changed the world.

How you might ask? Well for the first time Smith's map allowed people to predict what

lay beneath the ground. Prior to Smith's map if you wanted to find gold or coal or gas or any other natural resource you had to scout the surface for some sign of them – a glint of gold or an outcropping of coal. But with Smith's map you could look for particular rock types and know what likely lay beneath them and within them. His map allowed us to see below the surface and to uncover the depths. And so the electricity we gain from coal, the gas that fires our stoves, the gold we wear on chains around our necks, and much much more are possible because William Smith made a map in 1815.

Smith's story reminds us of the need to be cartographers of life. Before Smith we barely scratched the surface of the earth, but after Smith we could plumb the depths. Similarly, we could all do with a life map, a mental map that enables us to do more than scratch the surface of life, but to experience the depths of human possibility. For Christians Jesus is the Cartographer of Life, the one who provides us with a map of realities that we can barely see – of God, truth and love. He is the Word.

It's worth pausing to reflect on that because whilst most Christians are aware that Jesus



is the Word, many Christians do not live as if that were the case. Jesus said; “you have heard that it is said”. Where did they hear that it is said? They heard it from the Scriptures read to them week in week out in the synagogue. Through the tradition of reading and listening the people came to hear the word of God and to love it. But Jesus said, “but I said to you.” He wasn’t contradicting the Scriptures but he was interpreting them in radical ways. For Christians it is Jesus’ understanding of the Scriptures that truly matters, not our own. It is God’s word made flesh in Jesus that is

our guide. It is his nail-marked example that inspires the way that we should live not our own notions of what God ought to be saying to us. So when Christians make truth claims whilst waving a Bible in their hands or by quoting bits and pieces of Scripture we must beware. Jesus is the truth. He is the Word. What is he saying to us today? Then, of course, when we begin to try and answer that kind of question we must be willing to listen to the answer and accept it. That is difficult because we can allow our cultural baggage to suppress the living Word.

A minister took up a new position in a small country town, dependent for its income on timber milling. Walking by the river one day he noticed some of the men from his congregation standing atop logs floating down the river. This was the way the logs were transported from the forest to the mill. He admired the skill of the men in standing upon the moving logs and sawing a meter or two off the end of each as they floated downstream. But his admiration turned to horror when he saw the branding on the logs. They came from an opposition sawmill.

The men were cutting off the ends of the logs and rebranding them as their own.

The following Sunday the newly arrived minister stood up to preach. He chose as the title for his sermon, "Thou shalt not steal". Afterward he was congratulated by the loggers on a fine sermon. Pleased that they had got the point he took another walk by the river the following day. But to his utter astonishment there were the same men cutting off the end of the opposition's logs once more. Clearly they had not appreciated the point.

The following Sunday the pastor stood up to preach once more. This week's sermon title: was "Thou shalt not cut off the end of thy neighbour's logs." The next week the minister was sacked.

That's why Jesus is the Word of God. An ancient book that has no life in it by itself can do nothing. It requires the living Word to speak through it and when that happens general statements are made particular and personal. It is no longer possible to evade the truth when truth himself is standing right in front of you. That's what our passage in Matthew's Gospel brings us

today. These are not words to be explained away or evaded these are words to face. When we face them we see Jesus and in him we are given the strength to live them. May God help each one of us to do so.