

Parish of Central Exeter

15th Sunday after Pentecost

Morning Worship and Spiritual Communion

10 September 2023

Fulfilling the Law through Love

Welcome everyone.



Our reflections this morning have been written by Chris and the Intercessions by Helen. Many thanks.

Opening Sentences

O Lord, open our lips and our mouth shall proclaim your praise.

The night has passed, and the day lies open before us; let us pray with one heart and mind.

Silence is kept.

Opening Prayer

In you alone we put our hope,
God the Father, Creator and Sustainer,
who gives all good things
seen and unseen.

In you alone we put our hope,
God the Son, Saviour and Redeemer,
who died for our sins
and rose again.

In you alone we put our hope,
God the Spirit, Teacher and Comforter,
who moves us to sing
In you alone we put our hope.

(written by John Birch, and posted on Faith and Worship.)

Gathering Hymn

'All people that on Earth do dwell', sung here at a Songs of Praise broadcast from the old Naval College at Greenwich. Words on screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AskNCkBgZUA>

Collect for the fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

God, who in generous mercy sent the Holy Spirit
upon your Church in the burning fire of your love:
grant that your people may be fervent
in the fellowship of the gospel
that, always abiding in you,
they may be found steadfast in faith and active in service;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

The Lord's prayer

Father in heaven,
in your goodness
you pour out on your people all that they need,
and satisfy those who persist in prayer.
Make us bold in asking,
thankful in receiving,
tireless in seeking,
and joyful in finding,
that we may always proclaim your coming kingdom
and do your will on earth as in heaven. Amen.

from Revised Common Lectionary Prayers

New Testament Reading Romans 13: 8-14

Fulfilling the Law Through Love

⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

¹¹ Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. ¹² The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light. ¹³ Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarrelling and jealousy. ¹⁴ But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Gospel: Matthew 18: 15-22

If Your Brother Sins Against You

¹⁵ “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed^[1] in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

Forgiveness

²¹ Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” ²² Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Reflection

One of the distinguishing features of Matthew's Gospel is that its account of Jesus' teaching is mostly brought together into five lengthy discourses, each consisting of collected sayings of Jesus arranged around what is more or less a single topic. The five topics are generally characterized by commentators in some such way as follows:

- 5.1–7.29 — the Life of Discipleship (the "Sermon on the Mount");
- 10.1–11.1 — The Mission Charge;
- 13.1–53 — The Kingdom of Heaven (parables);
- 18.1–19.2 — The Life of Compassion: Life in the Church
- 23.1–26.1 — Warnings to Teachers and Leaders: the Last Things.

Each of these discourses ends with a roughly similar formula along the lines of "when Jesus had completed these sayings" (7.28-29, 11.1, 13.53, 19.1, and 26.1).

It has often been suggested that the evangelist was by this arrangement attempting to imply a parallel to the "five books" of Moses—often referred to as "the Pentateuch"—that mark the Jewish Scriptures (or "Old Testament" as Christians generally refer to them). And it is indeed entirely likely that the existence of the five books of mosaic Torah had some general influence on Matthew's decision to create five books of messianic Torah.

Our gospel passage this morning is taken from the fourth of these discourses, "The Life of Compassion". It falls naturally into three sections. Let us look at each in turn:

'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector.' (Matt. 18.15-17)

“The Life of Compassion” does not mean that we will never question or challenge the behaviour of another, or that the other will never question or challenge us. But there is a way of questioning another that is compassionate and “does not rejoice at wrong” (1 Cor. 13:6). It begins between the two alone; at the next stage it will include a few trusted companions; then, if necessary, it will be referred to the Christian community. Only then, if all else fails, should one regard the relationship as at an end (18:15-17). Or should that be our view, even then? How did Jesus himself regard Gentiles and tax collectors? There is surely here a delightful and intentional irony. Yes, at this point a bridge has been crossed. Yet perhaps a Christian is never quite permitted to give up on any relationship.

‘Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’ (Matt. 18.18)

To the community which seeks to act in compassion, the stewardship of the kingdom is given. The community now hears precisely the same words as had earlier been spoken to Peter (cf. 16:19). To Peter were promised “the keys” — that is, “binding” and “loosing” — best understood as the “permitting” and “forbidding” connected with rabbinic decisions on interpretation of Law: the rabbinic tradition is maintained that God recognizes the decisions of God’s people. So now Jesus gives the same power to the disciples as a group. There is no contradiction. Stewardship is given to Peter on the basis of his faith, and it means authority to be obedient. Now we learn that whoever shares in the obedience shares also in the authority. This is why popes and archbishops have at times been rebuked by lay people and have accepted the rebuke. At Lambeth Palace, the official residence of the archbishops of Canterbury, there is an inscription: “We seek not the honours of the Apostles, but their labours.” To those who accept the labours, the honours are given.

‘Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.’ (Matt. 18.19-20)

What, then, of this community at prayer? Are we really expected to take this seriously? What of Jesus’ own prayer that he might be delivered from the cross (26:39)? Was that prayer answered? In the last analysis, we must answer, “Yes, it was!” In the last analysis Jesus’ prayer was for the fulfilment of God’s purpose, and (by implication) for grace to be obedient to that purpose. Jesus did not simply pray to his heavenly Father for deliverance, but added to that

prayer, “Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will!” (Matt. 26.39). Any prayer that is truly “in his name” with Christ “in the midst” must be such prayer, as the Lord’s Prayer itself reminds us. This proviso is not, of course, to deny that when communities or individuals pray in hope, amazing things do at times seem to happen. The sceptic will say, perhaps these amazing things are only coincidence? Perhaps they are, and we must all beware of creating for ourselves a god who (as a friend of mine puts it), “finds parking places for charismatics but does nothing about Auschwitz.” At the same time we cannot deny the experience that Archbishop William Temple described: “When I pray, coincidences happen. When I don’t pray, they don’t happen.”

Additional Note on Binding and Loosing.

In contrast to notions (e.g., Stoic) of divine law being unalterable and universal, the rabbinic view of God’s attitude to Torah is that God gives authority for and has pleasure in human attempts to add to and even at times to correct his law.

Thus the rabbis frequently and deliberately legislate safeguards and interpretations that limit, refine, or redirect the biblical law. The rabbinic view of Torah is twofold—on the one hand, a written Torah that is static and eternal, on the other an oral Torah that is always living and evolving. Christine Hayes says, “for the most part rabbinic sources represent divine law as responsive to the shifting conditions of human existence, and humans as active participants in its ongoing evolution.”

Hence, the divine law of Israel is not portrayed as invariable and immutable. Indeed, the very mark of its divine and perfect nature is its ability to respond to the shifting circumstances of human experience, and to evolve in response to moral criticism and rhetorical suasion. Greco- Roman natural law theory envisaged the critique and modification of human positive law in the light of the divine natural law. In a paradoxical reversal [the rabbis] . . . depict the critique and modification of the divine law in the light of human experience and moral intuition. It is the divine law that is adjusted on the basis of human reasoning, not human law on the basis of a divine rational standard. (What’s Divine about Divine Law? Early Perspectives [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015], 326, 327).

In my view it is with these rabbinic ideas that we should connect the power to “bind” and “loose” to which Matthew refers in our passage from the gospel.

Worship Song

Came ye faithful, raise the anthem', sung here by the choir of St Edmundsbury Cathedral. Words on screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEoJbDZUIIs>



Lilies by Rita Lorenz – contemporary German.

The green represents the new life in Christ and the violet speaks of the authority given by God to those who love and trust Him.

Affirmation of Faith

We believe in God the Father,
from whom every family
in heaven and on earth is named.

We believe in God the Son,
who lives in our hearts through faith,
and fills us with his love.

We believe in God the Holy Spirit,
who strengthens us
with power from on high.

We believe in one God;

Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

(cf Ephesians 3)

Intercessions

Creator God, giver of life, you have blessed us with an abundance of gifts in this, your world, and we thank you that you are always with us. Help your church collectively and us as individuals to live in a way that ensures that your gifts will be there for future generations.

O God, give us your love for the whole of Creation

We rejoice that, as human beings, we have been created in your image and likeness. But we also recognise that humanity alone cannot adequately reflect you. The whole diversity of the earth is needed to give us even a glimpse of your wonder and greatness. Help us to cherish and protect this diversity.

O God, give us your love for the whole of Creation

We live in a world where some of us throw out food while others go to bed hungry; where some have modern amenities of life at their disposal while others struggle even to find water. Help us to understand what your call to justice requires of each of us. May we learn to share with one another and, in this way, come to share in your generosity to all.

O God, give us your love for the whole of Creation

We pray for all international, national and local leaders in politics and in business that they may be guided by your Spirit. Touch the hearts of those who look only for gain at the expense of the poor and the earth, that their decisions may be made in accordance with your will.

O God, hear our prayer

In a moment of quiet, we pause to remember our losses and we hold the people and places we love in the light of your unfailing love.

O God, hear our prayer

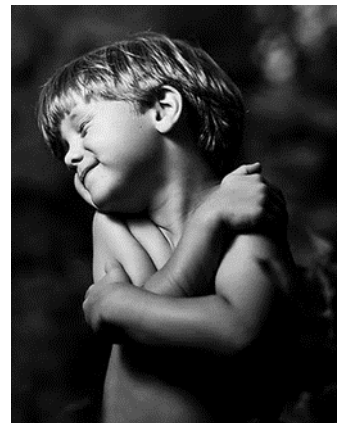
Creator God, You have blessed humankind with understanding, imagination and memory. Show us how to learn from past mistakes and plan for the future creatively and responsibly. Teach us to discover the worth of each thing, to be filled with awe and contemplation, and to recognise that we are profoundly united with every creature as we journey towards your infinite light. Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle for justice, love and peace.

Amen

Adapted from eco-congregation Ireland Resources for Creation Time 2015

The Peace

If alone, smile and hug yourself (God does). If otherwise, share the Peace as appropriate.



A short Spiritual Communion

The Book of Common Prayer reminds us that if we offer ourselves in penitence and faith, giving thanks for the redemption won by Christ crucified, we may truly 'eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ', even when we cannot receive the sacrament physically in ourselves.

Lord, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

O God,
help me to trust you,
help me to know that you are with me,
help me to believe that nothing
can separate me from your love
revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

An offertory prayer

We may not be in church, but we can still offer ourselves and our talents to God.

Blessed are you, God and creator of the universe,
as we offer you our activities, thanksgivings and our life.
We present ourselves, and our world, as we are and as you can make us,
for everything in heaven and on earth is yours,
and of your own do we give you. Blessed be God for ever.

As we prepare for communion you might like to listen to 'God's power to guide me' sung by the choir of St David's church. Thanks to Nigel for sending this. Words are on the screen.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RLtnnmWLV_Q



Because there is no Breaking and Sharing we can have only Spiritual Communion with Christ. I'm sure you can find a way to use a few minutes of silence or conversation to enjoy this, and make it a sacramental moment.

Giving thanks for Christ's death and resurrection you may wish to say

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits you have given me,
for all the pains and insults you have borne for me.
Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally,
I ask you to come spiritually into my heart.
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.

Post Communion Collect

Keep, O Lord, your Church, with your perpetual mercy;
and, because without you our human frailty cannot but fall,
keep us ever by your help from all things hurtful,
and lead us to all things profitable to our salvation;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Commission

God, mark us with grace and blessing!
Let our lives reflect your light and your goodness,
so that the way in which we live might bring others
to an awareness of your presence and your love.
Teach us to trust You with our whole heart,
and to praise You in every circumstance,
so that your grace and mercy might reach out through us
to the entire world. Amen.

Blessing

The Lord bless us and watch over us,
the Lord make his face shine upon us
and be gracious to us,
the Lord look kindly on us
and give us peace;
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be among us and remain with us always.
Amen.

Closing Music

‘Jesus calls us here to meet him.’ Sung at the Upper Clyde Parish church.
Words are on screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ModYoPReYYw>



‘Swallowed by Knowledge’ by Josh Thiessen

What we really need is not more knowledge but true wisdom.