

Sermon for St Augustine's Church. 16 January 2005
Introduction to The Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7)

1. Opening : is the bible relevant to us today?

How many of you have ever heard someone say something like ' oh, the Bible – that's just a dusty old book, it has nothing relevant to say to us today'?

If you've had the chance to read some or all of Matt chs 5-7 this past week, you'll know that the above comment has been made by someone who probably hasn't read the Bible recently or who, at least, isn't looking with their eyes opened by the Holy Spirit.

If you've ever asked the questions ;

What will I eat
How will I pay the bills
How can I have a happy marriage?
How will I have a successful career?
How on earth am I going to cope tomorrow?

Then you'd be joining a lot of other people who have also been preoccupied at some time or other with these kinds of concerns.....

Jesus has something to say to you and to them and to each one of us who, probably every day, are concerned about something or other related to our needs in this world.

TSOTM as recorded by Matt in chs 5-7, is choc-a-bloc full of not only relevant teaching which addresses real issues and concerns we may experience, but holds a **mandate for living in the Kingdom of God**.....It is a collection of JC's teaching, bearing in different ways on the theme of discipleship. You can also find about half of it in different parts of Luke's gospel too.....

The theme of this – Matt's longest and most wide-ranging collection of JC's teaching deals with the character, duties, attitudes and potential dangers of Christian disciples – it is a manifesto setting out the nature of the life in the K of God.

The SOTM makes no claim to present an ethic for all people – indeed much of it would make no sense as a universal code ; how can you legislate for what people are thinking in their minds?

It is concerned not with ethics in general, but with discipleship, with human beings in their obedience and devotion to God, not with a pattern for society...

It represents a demand more radical than any legislator could conceive, going far beyond what human nature can meet, a demand for perfection. Possibly the crowning verse of this whole sermon of Jesus is 5.48

“Be perfect therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect”

And central to the whole is the person of Jesus himself – the SOTM presents the radical demand of JC the Messiah, on all who respond to His preaching of God’s Kingdom – the sermon compels us, in the first place, to ask “ who he is who utters these words...’

Well, we’ve just celebrated C’mas, with the words – he is ‘Emmanuel, God with us”

And of course he is perfection Himself.....

So then, these three chs are what we are going to be studying together in the next weeks, through lent and up till Palm Sunday.

Why look at TSOTM now?

- **first time**; apparently its not been considered in this detail before
- **mandate of K of G** – for all would-be followers of JC
- **central teaching of JC**; its crucial to understand the essence of what he’s saying
- **Shows Xians how to live** – not legislation for rest of world
- **Relates to both Amos** which we studied in the Fall, and the **prophecy** from last year: which, if you remember, also challenges us to be different, to care for the poor and needy and so on.....
- Helps **answer qn** which results from that **spirit of the age** prophecy and from looking at Amos : *How then shall we live?* Or, to put it slightly clearer – *how then shall I live in a post-modern western world and remain true to this teaching and to Christ himself?*
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Story : We’ve mentioned that this sermon is for those who are Christ’s followers and so are part of the K of G

well, there’s a story told of Frederick William 4th of Prussia, who once visited a school and quizzed the students. He held up a stone and asked the children; To what kingdom does this belong?

they responded; **mineral**.

He then pointed to a flower and asked; *to what kingdom does this belong?* They answered '**plant**' he then pointed to a bird flying by outside the window and asked; *to what kingdom does this belong?* They replied '**animal**'.

Then he asked: **now, to what Kingdom do I belong?**

He unknowingly had raised a profoundly theological qn. *To what kingdom do I belong?*

Of course, in a literal sense we are members of the animal kingdom (some more than others!). But the magnificent thing for humans, is that it is within us, if we choose to follow Christ, to become part of another kingdom – **the kingdom of God**.

.....**the K of God** (or K of Heaven as Matt prefers to call it).....
what does that mean? What is the k?

IN English, when we use the term '**kingdom**' as in *United Kingdom pf GB and NI*, we're talking about the **land**, or **people** ruled by a king or queen. Or in fairytales, we often read of a king who says something like ' *I'll give you half my kingdom as a reward, And my daughter's hand in marriage if you ...ABC...*'

IN the gospels, the kingdom of God/heaven is usually **God's active rule** over his creation, especially in **saving his people from their sins** and the consequence of those sins. This includes God's **victory** over our spiritual enemies through JC, beginning in the present age; God asserted his rule in history by **defeating Satan** and death through the work of JC, even though God will not complete his display of authority until **JC returns in judgement**, when he will start the new world order.

The K of G then is a 'now' and a 'not yet'; it is an '*already*' but also a '*yet to be fulfilled*'.....

The k of G does not always literally mean the dynamic reign of God, but sometimes refers to the **gift of life** and salvation achieved by that reign. Jesus' disciples are to **seek the K** as the most valuable of possessions

Those who receive the K in the *present age* will enter the K in the age to come, for it also means '*eternal life*'; to seek the K of God is to **actively receive** the eternal life that JC brought. Seeking salvation does not end at the time of conversion, but continues throughout the life of the Christian.....

Context :

At the end of Mtt 4 we read that JC went about in Galilee *teaching* and preaching about the K of H, healing every disease and sickness, casting out demons and generally being very busy doing God's work! Large crowds from many areas heard about him and followed him. Now when he saw these crowds we are told he **withdrew to teach**. The crowds are **not** excluded here, but Jesus directs his teaching to his disciples.

JC , then, sits down as was traditional for a rabbi, to teach them. And JC chooses a **mountain** for this purpose – which prob refers to one of the hills by the Sea of Galilee where the concave slopes and sounding-board of the sea make acoustics very good for large numbers of people.

When I was 20 I visited Israel for 3 weeks, with a small group of friends. The days we spent by the sea of Galilee were some of the best – it was so peaceful, and the 'sea' was really a very large freshwater lake – great to swim in! The hills surrounding it were gently rolling hills – not mountains by Canadian standards anyway, so I can picture Jesus sitting maybe half-way up one of these slopes talking to his disciples, and his voice being carried in the natural amphitheatre that is created by the bowl of the surrounding countryside.

Now mountains are very interesting in Matt's gospel –

- There is the mountain of temptation in 4.8,
- the m'tain of this sermon in 5-7,
- the mount of transfiguration in 17, 1
- and the m'tain of farewell in 28.16.
- And these are **all** peaks in Mtt's emphasis.

The main point here in the 3 chs we're considering is the parallel to **Mt Sinai**. **Moses**, as you know, went up Mt Sinai to get the law from God to give to the people of Israel, And now, Moses' **great successor ascends a mountain** to receive from his Father and transmit to his disciples the law of the kingdom. We have a **new** law for a **new** people on a **new** m'tain by a **new** Moses.

So, what about The Content ?:

Well, we are going to be studying the content in some depth over the next weeks, and I don't want to give it all away here, but just to say the the Ctian life, as outlined in the scriptures, is very coherent and all-embracing. The citizens of the Kingdom of heaven are called to **put God first** in their motives and their actions, in their business and their language, in their thought life and their priorities; **all life comes under his royal control**.

And Next time anyone says to you – “ *the Bible is boring and irrelevant and has nothing to say to me*” just put a modern translation of Matt’s gospel into their hands and challenge them to read chs 5-7 (if nothing else) and then see what they say!!

Purpose of sermon

Tolstoy once accused these chs of being a ‘blueprint’ for utopia’. But is the SOTM just impractical idealism?

The life which the sermon indicates is meant to be lived out by citizens of the Kingdom, but they cannot even begin to live it until they enter that kingdom. The **moral imperative** is rooted firmly in the **indicative of rel’ship** with God. In other words – *the call to live this way only comes to those who are in rel’ship with God* through JC.

The standards of the sermon are neither readily attainable nor totally unattainable. To put them **beyond** anyone’s reach is to ignore the purpose of X’s sermon ~ to put them **within** everyone’s reach is to ignore the reality of human sin.....

They are attainable, but only by those who have experienced the new birth which is the indispensable condition of seeing and entering God’s kingdom. **When we hand over the reins of our lives to God’s control, his H/S comes to live within us and helps us to live for Jesus, and to be more like him.....**

The righteousness described in the sermon is an inner righteousness. It is the very antithesis of the inner evil which mars our hearts.....And, as in all the best movies, *There is only one solution* –

The tree must be made good if the fruit is to be good. Only belief in the necessity and possibility of a new birth can keep us from reading the sermon with either foolish optimism or hopeless despair.....

Actually, it is all of a piece with the ethical teaching of the **whole** New Testament; ‘ *become what you are*’Disciples are called by their master to become in practice what they **already are in the election and calling of God**. Christian ethics is inextricably tied to Xian beginnings; you cannot have the **fruit of righteousness** without the **root of rel’ship** with the **Righteous One**.

It seems on the one hand, unattainable -

And yet it is that which we must nevertheless strive to obtain, As the satirist Alexander Pope once said –

“A man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?”

These are kingdom ethics for kingdom people - a standard – a spur – for those who possess the Spirit of JC who laid it down..... As Paul wrote in Galatians 5.16:

“So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature”

and in 6.2 he says –

“ Carry each others burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ”.

Is the bible relevant to us today?

So, *is* the Bible old fashioned with nothing to say?
I think not!

You want to know how to act in **business dealings**?
Check out Mtt 5.33-42

You want to know how to behave in marriage or with the opp sex? Mtt 5.27-32 will help you out

You want to know what should be your attitude to money and the accumulation of wealth, see Mtt 6.19-24

You want to know if you should give more to the poor – go to Mtt 6.1-4

You worried about the future? Try Mtt.6.25-end

You worried about paying bills – look at Mtt 6 .33

You worried about where the next meals are coming from? Mtt 6.25-27

You want direction in praying or fasting? see Mtt 6.5-15

You want to know how to thwart your enemies? Mtt 5.43-48

You want your life to be different?

Turn to your Maker and heavenly Father, get right with Him first through faith in his Son JC ; then and only then will your behaviour change, then and only then will these teachings of Jesus be your mandate for living, your blueprint for living as a citizen of the K of G. You want to know how to live for him? Come along next week, and the week after that, and find out more. Oh, and you could have a look at the Beattitudes in 5.3-12 for next Sunday!