

**Sunday 23 February 2020**

*A sermon preached by the Precentor and Archdeacon of Melbourne, the Ven. Canon Heather Patacca, at St Paul's Cathedral on the Seventh Sunday after Epiphany.*

**Readings:** Leviticus 19.1-2, 9-18; 1 Corinthians 3.10-17; Matthew 5.38-48

In each of our readings today we have an exhortation to holiness, or perfection of life, because our being holy and seeking to show God's perfection demonstrates to others what our heavenly father is like. 'You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy', we read in v 2 of Leviticus 19. 'Be perfect therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect', Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew 5. 'Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you? God's temple is holy and you are that temple' the Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthian church.

Each reading expresses the acknowledgement that we live in the real world, a fallen world. But as those who are God's children, we are also those who can make known what the God who is perfect and holy is like. Far from being a Sunday church thing, or indeed a prudish thing, for those who honour God, for those who are his people, holiness is woven through and holds together the fabric of life.

So in our reading from Leviticus (Leviticus 19.1-2, 9-18), along with the exhortation and instructions given to the Israelites to be holy as the Lord their God is holy, also comes these descriptors of what holiness looks like in practice: looking out for the welfare of the poor and the alien; dealing honestly with one another; treating workers fairly and without exploitation for personal gain; not taking advantage of another's limitation or disability; treating and speaking of one another equitably; not hating other people; taking responsibility for keeping others accountable so as not to be an accessory to wrong-doing; not taking revenge; loving your neighbour as yourself. Holiness is political, it is social, it is relational, and it is relevant to daily experience for us all. Think of current topics this week in the news, on social media, of the bills being debated in parliament, and turn to Leviticus 19 and run your eye over verses 10 to 18 as I list the issues that were current this week: homelessness; refugees in detention centres; fraud and theft; workers being underpaid by restaurants, supermarkets, and airlines; elder abuse and difficulties in accessing the NDIS for the disabled; trolling of people on social media; some politicians' twitter feeds; people who cover up for those accused of abusing children in Melbourne schools; the swaps from one prime minister to another; international peace talks breaking down due to long-time hatred between nations. Holiness invites activism and is a very current and modern issue.

In our reading from 1 Corinthians 3 (1 Corinthians 3.10-17), we find ourselves in the midst of Paul's explanation that in the Christian life, the quality or pedigree of one's conversion is not the defining quality of Christian life, for all are built on the excellence of Jesus Christ. The building God's workers do on that foundation will be tested, and the builders will be saved, but as through fire, which will show up the value of their work. More important for the church in Corinth though, Paul says, is that God's temple is holy, and his people are his temple, and God will not tolerate those who have broken down his holy people – by implication those like himself or Apollos, so holiness of life is absolutely key. It is the obvious sign that as Paul writes here, God's people are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. It is the obvious

sign of God at work in his world. YOU are that temple. You, by implication, are the sign of God's presence in the world, the descriptor of God's character and concerns. How we each live is a demonstration of God's own values. God is holy.

There is some discussion amongst scholars as to how we should interpret these verses in our gospel reading today (Matthew 5.38-48). Both ways allow for them to be seen as a response to the harsh world in which Jesus and his first followers lived, as those living under Roman occupation where the Jewish leaders had no or little opportunity to exercise justice to protect their own people. The saying, 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' was based in the *lex talionis*: that is proportionate response when one is wronged. On the basis that a wronged person will likely execute a greater wrong on the one who injured them – it is hard to give an impartial response when you are the victim – the idea of proportionate response to a wrong didn't necessarily mean the exact same punishment would be meted out by the authorities, but something proportionate to the offence. It was intended to be an equaliser and a deterrent. The order of the day for many who experienced little justice in that political climate that was the Roman Empire was the desire for retaliation and revenge against those who had power over them. So some scholars suggest that Jesus' words – to turn the other cheek, to give one's cloak as well as your coat, to go the second mile, and giving to those who ask you – are in essence responses reflecting Jesus' servanthood. It's the servanthood we see exemplified in his washing the disciples' feet the night before his crucifixion, and when he suffered on the cross and did not strike back. Turn the other cheek, and go the extra mile are expressions that are part of our common parlance whether we have faith in Jesus Christ or not – we understand the implication of not retaliating, and of doing the extra service for someone. We particularly see the servanthood of Christ in these actions.

Other scholars suggest that in the context of that culture, to be hit on the right cheek, as is described quite specifically here, means that the person who struck you – assuming they are right handed like most of us are – has in fact given you a backhander, which as now, was then the way you hit someone to show you were much more powerful and more important than them. It was a 'status' type of smack. So to calmly turn your cheek to make easy another good slap on the other side becomes an act of quiet defiance that makes clear the one who has struck you was wrong to do so – a powerful act in an honour and shame based society.

The same goes for someone who has sued you for your coat, because also giving your cloak would mean a poor person would be left in their underwear, virtually naked. In that case such an unforgiving creditor would be shamed by that action by the person indebted to them. The Roman law allowed for Romans to press-gang other people to carry loads for them, but only for a mile. So the insistence to go another mile, against the law, would have shifted the power back to the Jewish person and made the Roman look foolish. If we interpret these comments of Jesus' this way, we are bringing to mind more of the Jesus who stared down the Jewish authorities of the day when they failed to honour God.

In both interpretations, however, we find in a sense the exact same thing as made clear by Leviticus. Whereas in our society one might be accused as being holier than thou because of obvious abstinence from what most people call real life, and a commitment to ceremonies

that are foreign to many, in fact holiness is a gritty thing. It is exercised and displayed in the hurly-burly of real life, it is not removed, it is a 'sleeves rolled up and getting stuck into life' thing. It is not something that talks of abstinence so much as right-doing that is clear for others to see. It is calling out the wrong we see, standing up for God's values, standing out for the sake of the gospel.

Now there are three particular things that we should be clear about as we hear these words from Scripture today: firstly, that the holiness our heavenly father calls us to is hard work. It is work because it is counter cultural, it is hard work because it is demanding. It is hard work because it is costly. It is hard work because it demands of us presence of mind. We shouldn't be surprised that holiness is hard work, and think that empowered by the Holy Spirit we are somehow able to be holy people with no effort or work and tiredness on our part.

Holiness needs to be hard wired. You may be one of those people who spend hours each day in prayer, kneeling on a specially hardened floor, handing out food parcels for the poor, polishing the church brass, and then arranging an activists' meeting and all before your morning coffee. Don't ask me why I chose those as the examples here – I think I have been watching too much Midsomer Murders... But there is in all of our minds the idea that there are some people for whom this following Jesus and assimilating holiness of life and spiritual practices is easy. I'd like to challenge that idea on behalf of the majority of us, of which I am one, who don't find that so. The people I know who are able to spend long periods of time in prayer, and accomplish great acts of godliness do so because they have worked hard to make prayer, Bible study, and listening to God habits in their lives. Bit by bit, they have increased in holiness and godliness because they have kept at practising habits that feed holiness. These habits are, as it were, now hard wired into their routines.

Holiness is also hard wearing. To be able to stand up for what is right, what is just, what God calls us to stand up for, we need to not be thin skinned, but to get on with the work and support one another in that. The temple that we are being built into is strong because we see God's holiness in one another when we meet together. Some might think they don't need to go to church each week, don't need to pray daily, don't need to study the Bible, and yet these are the very things where we are armoured and made ready for life in the power of the Spirit. That is what ensures we are those who are able to be tested as with fire and to stand firm in Christ.

When I was a young minister a wise and elderly minister said to me "Heather, when you preach, you must always preach the grace of God in Christ, because that is the whole point of preaching – to remind God's people of just how much he loves them, how much he has given them, and how he enables them". As I reflected on the extraordinary strength and level of demand in the readings we have today, I have to say it wasn't easy to hear grace so much as hear in the words I read where I personally wasn't doing a good enough job at being committed to holiness, until I reflected on the source of fair treatment of others. It is our incredible value to God and his desire that through us others see his love, even as we love them as we love ourselves. That we are in fact a work in progress, a building together as a whole, knit together as a holy temple, supporting and upholding one another as the Holy Spirit goes about its work on us, in us, and through us, marking us as God's people. And

how the grace of God in Jesus Christ, who died whilst we were still sinners, still God's enemies, underlies the call for us to love our enemies.

Practicing holiness leads to peace of heart, valuing others and lifting up the downtrodden. And of course it does, because those are all concerns of God's, and by being holy people we are just embodying those attributes in our world. Holiness is the word that describes God's otherness to this fallen world. Living and demonstrating holiness is about embodying God's otherness so we stand in contrast to the world around us. When we are holy people, we are part of God's work where 'God moments' break into other people's lives and circumstances. That's surely the point of being made in God's image and living as disciples of Christ in this beautiful but fallen world.