

MORNING SERVICE

Sunday 7 June 2009, Kilcalmonell, Killean & Kilchenzie

1st Sunday after Pentecost

preacher: Rev Martin Grashoff

hymns: Church Hymnary. Fourth Edition (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005) / Songs of God's People (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)

Welcome & Intimations

Opening Hymn : 'Holy wisdom, lamp of learning' (CH 604)

Children's Talk

Children's Hymn : 'One more step' (CH 530)

Prayer & Lord's Prayer

Blessed are you, O God,
for calling Abram to leave his safe space,
and for bringing him to a promised land,
and for blessing all nations through him.

Blessed are you, O God,
for giving us Jesus, your Son, to teach us
how to become your sons and daughters,
how to bless the earth and its inhabitants,
how to do your Word, even before hearing it.

Blessed are you, O God,
for allowing us to climb your holy mountain,
for giving us your Word through human speech and action,
for accepting us as we are.

And now as Jesus taught us, we pray:
Our Father...
...Amen.

Readings : Genesis 12:1-3 (*Good News Bible*) & Matthew 5:1-20 (*colometric translation*¹)

- ¹ *But when he sees the crowds, he goes up the mountain;
when he sits down, his followers come to him;*
- ² *and when he opens his mouth, he teaches them, saying:*

¹ A colometric-concordant translation. See: F.H. Breukelman, *Bijbelse theologie. I,1 Schrift-lezing*. Een verhandeling over de kolometrische weergave van bijbelse teksten als hulp bij het lezen en als grondslag voor de exegese (Kampen: Kok, 1980) – probably a good reason to learn Dutch. Some information about colometry, as distinguished from stichometry, in classical texts was already in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 11th Edition (1910 pass.), now on [Wikipedia](#). More can be found in: Bruce M. Metzger, *Manuscripts Of The Greek Bible. An Introduction to Greek Palæography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), which is on [Google Books](#) now.

3 Happy the poor with Spirit, *[cf. Ps. 33:19; Isa. 57:15]*
because theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 Happy the mourning,
because *they* will be comforted. *[cf. Isa. 61:2f]*

5 Happy the powerless,
because *they* will inherit the earth. *[=Ps. 37:11]*

6 Happy those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, *[cf. Ps. 107:5, 8f]*
because *they* will have their fill.

7 Happy the kind, *[cf. Prov. 14:21]*
because *they* will be shown kindness.

8 Happy the pure in heart, *[cf. Ps. 24:4]*
because *they* will see God.

9 Happy the peacemakers, *[cf. Prov. 10:10]*
because *they* will be called children of God.

10 Happy those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,
because theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 Happy are you
whenever they insult you and persecute you,
and say all kind of evil, *[cf. Isa. 51:7]*
lying against you for my sake;
rejoice and be filled with joy,
because your reward is great in heaven, *[cf. Gen. 15:1]*
for in the same way they persecuted the prophets before you.

13 *You* are the salt of the earth,
but if the salt loses its taste, with what will it be salted? –
it is good for nothing, except for throwing out
and being trampled by the people.

14 *You* are the light of the world; *[cf. Jn. 8:12]*
a city cannot be hidden, if it is placed on top of a mountain;
[cf. Isa. 2:2; Rev. 21:10]

15 nor do they light a lamp, and put it under the bowl,
but on the lamp stand, and it shines for all in the house;

16 in the same way your light must shine for the people,
so that they see your good works
and praise your father in heaven.

17 Do not think that I come to dissolve the Law and the Prophets;
I do not come to dissolve, but to complete;

18 for sure, I say to you, until the heaven and the earth disappear,
not one 'jota', or one stroke of a pen will disappear from the Law,
until everything is done;

19 therefore, whoever dismisses one of the least of these commandments,
and teaches the people in the same way,
the least he will be called in the kingdom of heaven;

but whoever does and teaches them,
he will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

20

For I say to you:

if your righteousness is not abundant,
more than that of the scribes and pharisees,
you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Hymn : 'I have a dream' (CH 710)

Sermon

The Sermon on the Mount² has become something of christianity's constitution. Matthew's Gospel has five different collections of Jesus' teachings,³ but certainly this first one, the Sermon on the Mount, has become the most central. The other Evangelists have handed down a lot of other words and teachings of Jesus, but virtually nothing seems to surpass these chapters 5-7 in Matthew's Gospel. You might say that the Sermon on the Mount has become a mountain in its own right.

You really do not need to be a believer, or even a christian, to know some phrases from the Sermon on the Mount: blessed are the meek, go the extra mile, turn the other cheek, build on sand, the Lord's Prayer – all these words have entered common English vocabulary long ago. The most surprising example I can remember was David Bowie, who, on a Freddie Mercury memorial concert, said the words of the Lord's Prayer before starting his act – and the whole stadium joined him in saying these words.

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One good reason for this all is that St Augustine wrote a very famous lecture about it. Actually, it was him who first called Matthew 5-7 the Sermon on the Mount.⁴ To Augustine Jesus was the Teacher who, with divine authority, passed on the Law of Moses to all people on earth. The way to be included in the community of these Jesus people was to obey the ethical teachings he gave. For Augustine the Sermon on the Mount was a guidebook to achieve spiritual perfection.⁵

² My main guides for this series of services are: Maarten den Dulk, *De bergrede*. Steunpunt van de vrijheid (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2001) / Pinchas Lapide, *Die Bergpredigt*. Utopie oder Programm? (Mainz: Matthias Grünewald, 1983) / F.H. Breukelman, *Bijbelse theologie. 1,1 Schrift-lezing*. Een verhandeling over de kolometrische weergave van bijbelse teksten als hulp bij het lezen en als grondslag voor de exegeese (Kampen: Kok, 1980)

³ These so-called discourses include: Matthew 5-7 (the Sermon on the Mount), 10 (Missionary Discourse), 13 (Parables of the Kingdom), 18 (the 'Church Rules') and 24-25 (Eschatological Discourse).

⁴ Augustine of Hippo, *De sermone Domini in monte* ('On the Lord's Sermon on the Mount', ± 395).

⁵ In Augustine's view to achieve spiritual perfection the human soul has to go through seven stages of faith in a process of purification, which can only be completed through the grace of God. These seven stages are connected to the Sermon on the Mount in three ways:

- as the seven commandments of God, announced in the Beatitudes;
- as the seven gifts of the Spirit, according to the Latin translation of Isaiah 11;
- as the seven supplications of the Lord's Prayer.

Augustine's explanation of Matthew 5-7 has been highly influential from his days down to our very own.

However, alongside with Augustine's spiritual interpretation of Jesus' words, there has always been a far more practical, and also rather radical, way of reading the Sermon on the Mount. St Francis of Assisi and his followers, for example, have taken the commandment of poverty very literal, possessing nothing and living only from what people freely gave them. They have also practised the commandment to love your enemies in a most direct manner. In the midst of the Crusades St Francis went to Egypt to talk about peace. (If Obama is doing that now, he steps into a good tradition.) The hymn we know as 'Make me a channel of your peace'⁶ comes straight from this Franciscan tradition.

In our own days the Christian Socialist Movement has certainly read the Sermon on the Mount from this perspective, and proclaimed it a programme of political change. Instead of perceiving the Sermon on the Mount as a way to find God, this prophetic approach reveals how God is coming to the people, especially to the poor, the marginalised, the oppressed. From this perspective the powers that be are the house built on sand, which will totally collapse. But the powerless are those who can already start building God's house of a new community, which is founded on the rock. It is easy to dismiss this socialist zeal in the face of this week's elections and the downfall of virtually all former socialist parties, but that would be unfair and unwise. This revolutionary power is certainly present in the words of Jesus.⁷

In recent times a third way of reading has emerged: a Jewish one. Scholars like Pinchas Lapide have clearly explained how strongly Jesus' preaching is embedded in his Jewish faith.⁸ Reading the Sermon on the Mount this way, leads us beyond the choice between either a spiritual or a political interpretation. Reading the Sermon on the Mount in its original Jewish context teaches us how Jesus speaks words of deep faith, which inevitably lead to acts of justice and peace. Instead of outplaying the spiritual against the social, we learn to connect faith and action in a new and more holistic way. And most important, we learn that Jesus all but rejects his Jewish faith, and actually compels us to reread the Old Testament, especially the Law and the Prophets, as a primary source of christian faith.

So we have at least three different ways of reading the Sermon on the Mount: a spiritual, a prophetic and a Jewish one.⁹ We should not mix them up, but neither do we need to make one exclude the other. Jesus' teaching intends to move us forward, to make us do better next time – or even fail better. If we tend to become too spiritual, there is the prophetic zeal to get us to work in this world. If we start to feel that changing the world totally depends on ourselves, there is the spiritual call to have

⁶ *Church Hymnary* (4th Edition) 528, and also 527.

⁷ Which links to Labour politicians like John Smith (1938-1994). A passionate commentary on the Sermon on the Mount from a Christian Socialist perspective was published by the Swiss Lutheran theologian Leonhard Ragaz (1868-1945): *Die Bergpredigt Jesu* (Bern: Lang, 1945). I think he is hardly known in the Anglo-Saxon world, but there is a short [online biography](#) available in German.

⁸ Pinchas Lapide, *Die Bergpredigt*. Utopie oder Programm? (Mainz: Matthias Grünewald, 1983) [English translation: *The Sermon On The Mount. Utopia or Program for Action?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986)]

⁹ One could consider Karl Barth's interpretation as a fourth way, but for various reasons – not making this sermon too comprehensive being a major one – I will leave that out.

more faith. If we feel tempted to see our christian faith – or even our particular variety of christian faith – as exclusively the best, there is Jesus' own call to return to God's own covenant with Israel. God does work in mysterious ways, not confined to a particular church or even a particular religion. Three different ways of reading the Sermon on the Mount both complement and challenge each other. And for that reason they challenge us to read again, and again, and again. And then *to do* the words!

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Now let us have a closer look at the opening part of the Sermon on the Mount, as we have heard it today.

First of all: that mountain. Tourists in Galilee today will be shown some place where it is thought Jesus taught the crowds. I have heard it is a beautiful place. However, Matthew does not give any clue of its whereabouts. He just says, *the mountain*. Indeed, rather than pinpointing it onto some location on Israel's national grid, he obviously expects us to recognise it as a theological mountain. For that is what it is: it points us to the biblical mountains that determined Israel's history as people of God: Sinai, Carmel, Horeb. As God was revealed there in the Word spoken by prophets – Moses and Elijah – so Jesus is about to reveal Word of God anew.

Once we see this, the mountain will become movable. It is not attached to the Holy Land, or to the days of Jesus' life on earth. When we really feel touched or challenged by Jesus' teaching, the mountain is there. It could happen on Dun Skeig or Beinn Ghuilleon. It could even happen on a pulpit in a church on a Dutch dyke or 'terp'.¹⁰

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How does Jesus begin his teachings? Exactly as the book Genesis opens: with a benediction of all the good there is. *Blessed are the poor... Happy are the powerless...* This is not just a man called Jesus looking down on the people from his high position on a hillside. Not at all! In no way does Jesus look down upon his disciples or upon the many others who come to listen. Instead Jesus looks at them – as he now looks at us – through the eyes of God. In God's eyes they look different: not a motley crew of uneducated, excluded, poor, coarse or crippled individuals. Jesus sees in them the original blessing God has granted to each and everyone. They are... *blessed...! happy...!* Jesus' teachings begin with a chant of blessings. In these people, successful or failing, doing good or wrong, strong or broken, *God's kingdom is already present*.

Jesus calls it literally the *kingdom of the heavens*. (In translations the plural disappears, because it is not proper English.) Mind that he does *not* say 'in heaven'. That is what many christian theologians have made from it. It was okay to be poor and

¹⁰ A 'terp' is a man-made mound to provide safe ground during high tide in the north of The Netherlands, in East Frisia and South Denmark, built from c. 500 BCE till c. 700 CE; gradually superseded by dykes from the 12th century onwards.

meeK, because after this earthly vale of tears there would be a heaven as reward. Therefore the poor must not challenge or fight the comfortable positions of the powerful in this world. That, however, is a grave misunderstanding of Jesus' words. He uses a common Hebrew phrase, since he spoke Aramaic. 'The heavens' (with that peculiar plural) is simply a name for God, like 'Lord', 'Holy One' or 'the Name'. The *kingdom of the heavens* is God present and revealed in creation and among the people.

So this is our first lesson: whatever we do, we should start with a blessing, because only that way we can begin to see the kingdom coming, here and now, in our very own world.

Then Jesus turns to his closest followers, the twelve we usually call 'disciples'. In the first place that means that they are Jesus' students, his pupils. He teaches them, they learn by doing what Jesus says and by hearing his words. But! They are not the privileged inner circle, elevated above the crowds who still have to learn a lot. Mind that Jesus *first* addresses the many in the wider circle around him. First Jesus blesses them. The purpose of being one of the twelve chosen is to serve these crowds. Jesus is teaching his disciples, only in order that they can teach, support, encourage, lead the many others.

So here is our second lesson: a congregation does not exist for its own welfare or salvation, but always to serve the world. The church exists for no other reason than serving the world in order to reveal God's kingdom already present in it.

Finally Jesus points out where he stands and what he expects his followers to do. You could say he gives a clear mission statement. First, in words that cannot be misunderstood, Jesus states that his mission is to explain the Torah in order to do the commandments, all of them, down to the very smallest. It is very important that we always keep that in mind. Jesus is not replacing or dismissing the Law, but he interprets it in a way that includes all people on earth. The letter matters, but the Spirit needs to be moving. Fulfilling the Torah does not mean superseding it with a new rule, but to find the very heart of it – which has the power to touch the hearts of all.

From his followers Jesus simply asks *to do the Torah*, wholeheartedly and abundant, determined and joyfully, flexible and persistently. He enters into a contract – he will be teaching and giving examples, they will be learning and practising. But this is certainly not a dull, legal thing. It is a commitment to life and for life.

So here is our third lesson: being followers of Jesus means a commitment for life to do justice, to make peace, to love this world and those who dwell in it. There is no use in being a church member unless that translates itself into daily work.

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So this is how the Sermon on the Mount takes off. Jesus climbs this biblical mountain to see his followers and all those around them from God's point of view. It happened

2,000 years ago – and it is happening today. First Jesus affirms the blessing God has given to all people, as signs of the kingdom already present. Then Jesus addresses his followers. They are the ones to learn Torah in order to serve the world. Learning Torah, doing *deeds of kindness*, and learning again – that is the road they have entered. And that still is the road we have to follow.

Once Jesus has made this three part beginning of his teachings, his actual lessons can commence. Next week we will read and learn further.

Amen.

Hymn : ‘Help us accept each other’ (SoGP 41) – *tune: 331 Penlan / CH 644*’)

Offering brought forward

Prayer of Intercession

God of Jesus and Mary,
God of Moses and Miriam,
God-with-us,
we commend in your care
the poor – that they may be filled with Spirit;
the mourning – that their tears may be counted;
the powerless – that they may claim their own place;
those who hunger for justice – that they may have their fill,
the kind – that they may be treated well;
the pure – that they may find you;
the peacemakers – that they may be honoured.
And we commit ourselves, O God,
to bring good Spirit to the poor,
to wipe the tears from the eyes of those who suffer,
to make space for all people,
to provide just laws and to keep these,
to treat the merciful with kindness,
to enable the pure to find your presence,
to support those who make peace.

In silence we remember those we know
who need us to remember them.

(silence)

This we pray
as the Spirit leads us,
and the Son teaches –
so the Father hears us.

Amen.

Closing Hymn : ‘Teach me, O Lord, the perfect way’ (CH 79)

Blessing