

## MORNING SERVICE

Sunday 14 June 2009, Kilcalmonell, Killean & Kilchenzie

*2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost*

*preacher: Rev Martin Grashoff*

*hymns: Church Hymnary. Fourth Edition (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005)*

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### Welcome & Intimations

**Opening Hymn** : 'In the name of Christ we gather' (CH 677)

**Children's Talk**

**Children's Hymn** : 'When I needed a neighbour' (CH 544)

### Prayer & Lord's Prayer

Blessed are, O God,  
for you have given us the commandment  
to reconcile what was broken.  
You teach us, O God,  
the grace of confession,  
among ourselves and towards each other –

*(silence)*

You teach us, O God,  
the chance of conversion,  
as the challenge to rid ourselves from evil,  
and as the possibility of a brandnew start –

*(silence)*

And through that, O God, you teach us  
the healing of reconciliation,  
a gift from heaven  
coming to us in earthly play –

*(silence)*

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

**Readings** : Leviticus 19:17-19 (*Good News Bible*) & Matthew 5:21-48 (*colometric translation*<sup>1</sup>)

*[Matthew 5:21-48:]*

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<sup>1</sup> 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*, 11<sup>th</sup> 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.

21 You have heard that it was said to the patriarchs:  
you shall not murder; *[=Ex. 20:13; Deut. 5:17]*  
and whoever murders, is subject to judgement. *[cf. Ex.21:12; Lev. 24:17]*

22 But I say to you:  
whoever is very angry with his brother, is subject to judgement;  
and whoever says to his brother, 'Nitwit!', is subject to the council;  
and whoever says, 'Moron!', is subject to the 'gehenna' of the fire;  
23 whenever you bring your offerings forward to the altar,  
and there you remember that your brother has something against you –  
24 leave your offering there before the altar and go,  
first sort it out with your brother,  
and then you can come and bring your offering;  
25 be quick to agree with your opponent  
while you are still on the road with him,  
lest the accuser hands you over to the judge,  
and the judge to the warder,  
and you are thrown into prison;  
26 for sure, I say to you, you will never get out of there  
until you have paid back the last penny.

27 You have heard that it was said:  
you shall not commit adultery. *[=Ex. 20:14; Deut. 5:18]*

28 But I say to you:  
whoever watches a woman to desire her,  
already commits adultery in his heart;  
29 but if your right eye makes you stumble,  
take it out and throw it from you,  
for it is better for you to lose one of your body parts  
than for your whole body to be thrown in 'gehenna';  
30 and if your right hand makes you stumble,  
cut it off and throw it from you,  
for it is better for you to lose one of your body parts  
than for your whole body to go into 'gehenna'.

31 And it was said:  
whoever sends away his wife,  
must give her a certificate of divorce; *[cf. Deut. 24:1ff]*

32 But I say to you:  
everyone who sends away his wife, except for an act of fornication,  
makes her commit adultery,  
and whoever marries her who was sent away, commits adultery.

33 Also, you have heard that it was said to the patriarchs:  
you shall not break an oath, *[=Lev. 19:12;]*  
but pay back your oaths to the Lord. *[cf. Deut. 23:21]*

34 But I say to you:  
do not swear at all, *[cf. Deut. 23:22f]*  
either by the heaven, because it is the throne of God, *[cf. Isa. 66:1; Ps. 11:4]*  
35 or by the earth, because it is the footstool for his feet, *[cf. Isa. 66:1; Ps. 99:5]*

or by Jerusalem, because it is the city of the great king; [cf. Ps. 48:3]  
 36 do not swear by your head,  
 because you are not able to make one hair white or black;  
 37 but your word 'yes' must be 'yes', and 'no' 'no',  
 and anything more than this comes from the evil one.  
 38 You have heard that it was said:  
 an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. [Ex. 21:24f; Lev. 24:20; Deut.  
 39 But I say to you: 19:21]  
 do not resist the evil one, [cf. Prov. 20:22]  
 but whoever slaps you on the right cheek,  
 also turn to him the other;  
 40 and if someone wishes you to be judged and to take your tunic,  
 also leave your cloak with him;  
 41 and whoever forces you to go one mile,  
 go with him two [miles];  
 42 give to the one who asks from you,  
 and if one wants to borrow from you: do not turn away. [cf. Deut. 15:7f]  
 43 You have heard that it was said:  
 you shall love your neighbour [Lev. 19:18]  
 and you shall hate your enemy. [cf. Deut. 7:2, 23:3f]  
 44 But I say to you:  
 you must love your enemies [cf. Lev. 19:34]  
 and pray for those who persecute you,  
 45 so that you become children of your father in heaven,  
 because he makes his sun rise on evil ones and good ones,  
 and sends rain on righteous and unjust;  
 46 for if you love those who love you,  
 what reward do you have? –  
 do not the tax collectors do the same? –  
 47 and if you greet your brothers only,  
 what more do you do? –  
 do not the foreigners do the same?  
 48 Therefore, *you* shall be perfect, [cf. Lev. 19:2; Deut. 18:13]  
 as your heavenly father is perfect.

**Hymn** : 'The church is wherever God's people are praising' (CH 522)

### Sermon

Last we week we read the opening part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.<sup>2</sup> We have seen how Jesus climbs a biblical mountain to show his followers and all those around them how God's kingdom is alive in their midst. Affirming the blessing God has given

<sup>2</sup> Main sources for this sermon: Maarten den Dulk, *De bergrede*. Steunpunt van de vrijheid (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2001), and: Pinchas Lapide, *Die Bergpredigt*. Utopie oder Programm? (Mainz: Matthias Grünewald, 1983 [English translation of the latter: *The Sermon On The Mount*. Utopia or Program for Action? (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986) – the English translation is now a collector's item, available on Amazon for over £ 100, while the German original also costs at least € 25 for a used copy]

to all people, Jesus teaches his followers to learn Torah by doing *deeds of kindness*. Today we have heard the first lesson of these teachings.

Starting from biblical commandments, carefully chosen by Jesus, we are taught how to connect these to our own life and how to interpret them for daily use. Jesus steps into a very rabbinic way of reading the bible. As he said in the opening part, he is absolutely not trying to replace or supersede the Law given by Moses. He is interpreting.

The formula *You have heard... but I say to you* is a typical rabbinic way of speaking and teaching. It does not indicate an opposition, or (as many commentaries call it) an antithesis, but the beginning of a passionate search for the true meaning of a commandment, beyond the literal meaning. True to his Jewish tradition Jesus takes the literal meaning very serious, but he knows very well that it is the interpretation that connects and activates the words in the ever changing context of real life. Jesus is looking for the white fire, he is reading in between the lines of letters, the black fire. He follows the Spirit where it is moving and he invites us to continue following the Spirit within our own situation and context.

Jesus has a deep insight into human nature. He knows the good is there, but it is almost always covered and hidden under layers of weakness, error and plain wickedness. Jesus sees it and knows it in the eyes and hands of those hearing him. And that includes us, here and now. The only way to give the goodness that comes from doing the commandments a real chance, is to build a fence around them. He adds new commandments, only to prevent people from violating the actual commandment.<sup>3</sup>

For example, we will normally not kill each other. But how often are we already on the path towards it? When we hate one another, when we swear at others, our hearts are already departing from seeing the good in them. So, as a kind of fence around the commandment not to kill, Jesus adds new guidelines, like not swearing and quickly sorting out conflicts. This 'fencing off' of the Torah is a very rabbinic thing, and Jesus joins in that tradition.

Jesus' first lesson comes in two parts: first he explains commandments that touch on reconciling human relations and relationships; then he explains commandments about our response to evil. Let us listen to Jesus' teaching.

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Three commandments Jesus picks: not to murder, not to commit adultery, and rules on ending a marriage. All three are about how low we can stoop in our interpersonal relations, murder being the absolute end of any relation. The fence around these commandments, the way to avoid even coming close to violating them, is to block off temptation and to discipline ourselves.

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<sup>3</sup> Talmudic testimony for this method: e.g. *Pirqa Avot* III,13.

Jesus uses pretty strong language: take out your eye, cut off your hand. He is also very practical: solve your conflicts as soon and as generous as possible to avoid ending in court. It seems that Jesus is very strict on divorce, but actually what he means is that it should only happen if a relationship is broken or damaged beyond repair.

Reconciliation requires three steps: first to confess what exactly went wrong, then to convert one's behaviour, and finally to restore relations. The first step is often the most difficult: confessing. The second step can be obstructed in many ways, because we all have our limitations. But once these two steps have been made, reconciliation will be complete.

Now I would invite you to think for yourself, or discuss with those around you, finding practical examples of how we can reconcile human relations. If you have found an example, please come forward and write it on a slip of paper. We will stick these to the pulpit as a common lesson.

*(3 mins of learning)*

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In the second part of his lesson on love Jesus reflects on the ways we respond to evil, because at some point evil will slip into our relations. Jesus chooses the commandments on breaking oaths, the rules for retaliation, and finally the call to loving our neighbour. Our most natural reaction to wickedness seems to be to fight it, to hit back. But in most of the cases that is actually based on fear, which is not really helpful.

Jesus calls us to be creative. Instead of hitting back, we could give in. That is the kind of reaction an aggressor does not expect. By giving in he might be disarmed. If we do not react from fear ourselves, the fear that is hidden behind aggression becomes senseless. But of course Jesus does not ask us to be passive in every situation. That would be against the commitment to do justice. In reality this is about the fine art of balancing between disarming and standing up. There are no general rules for that, because it depends on the situation and our own judgement.

The touchstone is the stranger, the one who cannot fall back on a social network and resources of her own. The one who has a different view on reality because he comes from elsewhere. In fact, the stranger is the true neighbour: just the one who happens to cross our path. In the stranger we should see the same image of God that lives in us. The stranger is part of ourselves, equally in need of love, and equally frail, weak or faulty. To hate a stranger is to hate ourselves. But how difficult can this lesson be!

Jesus gives a unique commandment: to love our enemy. Actually the Old Testament never says we have to hate our enemy – it must be an interpretation from Matthew, not Jesus' own words – but to state it so specific, *you must love your enemies*, is

unique. Jesus really radicalises the commandment from Leviticus to *love your neighbour as yourself*.

Now I would invite you to think for yourself, or discuss with those around you, finding practical examples of how we can love our enemy. If you have found an example, please come forward and write it on a slip of paper. We will stick these to the pulpit as a common lesson.

*(3 mins of learning)*

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Jesus' concluding thesis is: *Therefore, you shall be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect*. Now that may sound pretty impossible. We can never be as good as God. How do we react to this?

We may say that Jesus' words are madness. If we do, we find ourselves in the venerable company of both the German prime minister Bismarck and the socialist philosopher Herbert Marcuse.

We could also see this as a beautiful utopia, a perfect state that still has to come. But if we do, we actually move the Sermon on the Mount very much into a far future, vastly beyond our days.

What we should do, I think, is remember Jesus' words at the beginning: *You are the salt of the earth*. Because it is in and through the practical examples of human reconciliation and resisting evil that the grand vision of the Sermon on the Mount materialises. It may seem small, tiny, or even futile. But exactly there is the place for true hope, for prophetic witness: in the daily things we do. Perfection is not about being superhuman, but about truly human. That is: living by the goodness God has granted us, and showing it to the world. Even if it is just once in a while. Because in the wee things we greatly show that it is truly possible to reconcile people and to disarm evil. *All creatures great and small* can do this. Let us take up that challenge!

Amen.

**Hymn** : 'We lay our broken world' (CH 721)

**Offering brought forward**

**Prayer of Intercession**

God of love and life,  
in prayer we remember the brokenness of our world,  
and the ways in which we can mess up our relationships.  
We pray that we may see the human in our enemies,  
instead of being taken away by our own fear.  
We pray that we may be wise to avoid temptation,

and instead enjoy the beauty of our world in honesty.  
We pray that we may welcome the stranger,  
because in him we recognise ourselves,  
and through her we learn to look in new ways.  
God of life and love,  
make us love ourselves, our brothers and sisters,  
and the stranger who crosses our path;  
make us reconcile and restore  
the broken patterns of your creation.

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** : 'Brother, sister, let me serve you' (CH 694)  
**Blessing**