

Matthew 5:21-26

'You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgement." But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, "You fool", you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.'

But I say to you

At the age of five or so, I read a book about Jesus called *A Children's Life of Christ*, and I was hooked. I grew older and read more about him. His life was a wonderful story, and he himself told wonderful stories: the parables. He had compassion for people in need, and a remarkable ability to heal them. He listened and learned from people who were regarded by powerful men of his day as not their equals: women and children, foreigners too, were accepted by him as full members of God's kingdom; not worthy of God's love, for who can be, but beneficiaries of it, nevertheless.

My childhood churchgoing days were erratic, more off than on, but I decided that I wanted to be a Christian minister and probably a missionary. So, at 21, I found myself a student at a Methodist seminary in Cambridge, England, where I took a transformative course called: "Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World". It was then that something struck me with the force of a tsunami, namely: Jesus was a failure. Betrayed by one of his followers, hated and

hounded by the religious establishment, he died the cruel, humiliating and excruciatingly painful death of crucifixion. He was, as our former President is wont to say, a loser.

Still, it made no difference to me. By then, I had come to see that the compassion and wisdom of Jesus were special. Only a few enlightened souls seemed comparable to him: Confucius; Socrates; the Buddha; the remarkable Muslim mystic, Rumi. None of these led easy or successful lives, by human standards, any more than Jesus did. Yet, when I read, thought, or meditated upon Jesus, it seemed that the universe was a better place, that suffering could not overwhelm goodness and hope, that life was a gift to be lived well under the shadow of divine grace. The churches, it seemed to me, are places where the memory of Jesus is kept alive, and his vision of God embraced and worshiped.

Well, it's one thing to rhapsodize about reality as a young man embarking upon a hopeful future. It's quite another thing to live and breathe it, especially in the Christian workplace.

I began my working life in India, where Christians form a small minority of the population. I was welcomed, fed, looked after, and loved by Indian Christians; not just by Christians, to be sure, but especially by them. I discovered the church there to be a family, a home from home, where it was easy to make friends and be accepted. Yet it was also in India that I lost my innocence about Christian faith. For a start, there was a great deal of corruption in parts of the church. But far more important: like so many believers, I thought that my view of faith was the norm, that the church was the place where Jesus the teacher and healer was celebrated and shared. I was taken aback when one of the organists told me that she was there for the music and that she wasn't much of a believer. I got to know some lovely Anglo-Indian ladies, of mixed blood, who felt a definite connection to England, where they had never been and

never would go. More than anything else, church for them was an identity thing, celebrating the English religion that affirmed their hybrid culture. I grew up. I learned that people come to church for many reasons. Indeed, the same person can come to church for many reasons: for music, and friendship, and social events, and many other things, maybe even including at least a nod to the man from Nazareth. I learned about the many ways of being Christian. It wasn't just commitment to Jesus.

I was also amazed to encounter people who co-opted Jesus to their angry view of reality, I found this in India and England, but it's a noxious weed that also flourishes mightily in this land. Jesus justifies white nationalism, or the degradation of women, or a particular form of sexuality and marriage. If you pay attention to the New Testament, it's easy to rescue Jesus from such parodies of his teaching and meaning, but those who misuse him probably don't read much and anyway aren't interested in truth or justice or healing or other gospel virtues. Jesus doesn't challenge them to be better people; they co-opt him to excuse their hatred and bigotry.

So, I have reached the autumn of my life, and am tempted to find its meaning summed up by words once spoken to Gary and Joe and others and me at a clergy lunch in the Round House a couple of decades ago. One of our members said: 'It doesn't matter what religion you belong to, as long as you're ashamed of it'. To be sure, I am ashamed of religion's excesses but remain a believer.

It was reading today's very difficult passage that conjured up all the memories and feelings that I've shared with you. They are words of Jesus and, difficult as they are, they remind me that for me he is the beginning and end of religion.

But how do we understand his importance? His words offer us clues. He was talking to his followers about how to behave towards each other. It is best, he says, to sort out all your problems as amicably as possible, rather than head

for the lawyers. This isn't the most interesting bit of the Sermon on the Mount, but it does ask of them, and of me: Why should I listen to Jesus? Why should I pay attention to him who is, by many people's standards, a loser? Well, the clue in the passage is when Jesus says: 'But I say to you...'

Jesus revered the scriptures. The most authoritative figure from the Jewish past was Moses, to whom God gave the commandments, including the commandment not to murder. So, who on earth is a person who says: 'You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgement." But I say to you...' Who did Jesus think he was, challenging **the** authoritative religious figure of the past? Another insight to glean from this passage: some of the most interesting gospel indications of the meaning of Jesus are implicit, things we might easily miss if we don't pay attention. For example, among those listening to him were his twelve apostles, one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel that formed the people of God. They are founders of a new people of God, the Church. Amazingly, shockingly, Jesus doesn't count himself among this new people of God; rather, he is the one who calls them into being, as God called another people, the Jews into being.

You may think you know where I am going with this. Jesus is the main man; indeed, more than a man. He is: Messiah; Son of God; Son of Man; Saviour; the Incarnate Word; very God of very God; that sort of thing. So, we'd better believe in and follow him. Well, no, that's not quite what I'm saying. To be honest, I have no idea what these titles mean. Well, I have an intellectual understanding, perhaps, but they don't grip and enliven me, or speak to me. Time moves on and that sort of language isn't my sort of language, or anybody's sort of language in the 21st century. When people occasionally tell me that unless I believe in Jesus as the unique Son of God, I can't be saved, they might as well be talking Martian to me, and I think even to themselves.

Honestly, what most such people are really saying is that they are okay, and I can only be okay if I agree with them.

Instead, what I get from this passage, and the Sermon on the Mount of which it's a part, is that Jesus is an extraordinarily authoritative person whom I would do well to listen to. Over long years, I've heard many religious and ideological voices try to sell me their vision of the world, some of them in the name of Jesus, but I don't feel able to buy their sometimes self-serving and even intimidating wares. Instead, I return to the man from Nazareth. Anyone who reads the gospels carefully finds a man who could often be scary but whose vision was of a kingdom ruled by a good God whose generous and overflowing grace is for all, whose demands are all-consuming but in whose service is perfect freedom. So, when Jesus says, in scripture, or in my head when I pray, 'But I say to you...', I have learned to listen, because he raises fundamental issues of grace and hope, good and evil, life and death. When I've listened to him, things haven't always been easy, but they have seemed right. When I haven't listened, I've usually had my regrets.

So, when I find myself in church these days, I enjoy seeing friends, hearing our musicians, looking round this lovely building. But they are not my major reason for being here.