

SUNDAY 7A BIRKENHEAD 2017

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This week I attended the annual Diocesan Ministry Conference as some of you may know. Each year we have a different topic and a different guest speaker on a particular area of ministry. This year our topic was 'Un-divorcing Mission and Spirituality.' It may sound like an awkward title. But its purpose was clear, often in the church we have split mission and spirituality in to two distinct activities. This topic of Un-divorcing Mission and Spirituality came out of the Bishop's challenge at last year's Synod, that as Anglicans we can be very good at 'walking the walk' – acts of service, giving to charity etc. But we are often not good at 'talking the talk' – that is, speaking of our faith to others and inviting them to church and helping them explore the Gospel.

As I sat through the many talks and discussions I pondered to myself why we are not good at evangelism – sharing our faith. I can tell you I didn't

find some magic solution, but with those thoughts fresh in my mind, this week's Gospel challenged me deeply. For in Matthew's Gospel today Jesus speaks of 'walking the walk'. But what of 'talking the talk'? Does he offer us both in this passage? At first reading we may not think so. For it seems he is focused on 'moral teaching' and not on telling others directly about salvation. But perhaps there is more than meets the eye. Let us then explore firstly what Jesus sees as 'walking the walk.'

Today as mentioned we have Jesus continuing the Sermon on the Mount. And he is at his most difficult once again. What a challenge we cry! Unrealistic! Surely Jesus doesn't mean what he says, this must be his use of hyperbole which he employs all the time. Often when confronted with today's teaching, Christians have sought to offer a variety of interpretations. One commentator puts them as the following:

- Jesus was setting forth a set of values to which his disciples should aspire. They are impossible, but that's the point. By striving toward them, we live better than we would otherwise.

- Jesus' words throughout the Sermon on the Mount reveal the impossibility of human righteousness, preparing us for the advent of grace.
- Jesus was speaking to his disciples as individuals. In our modern world, with its complex relationships, global economics, and violent military threats, his advice simple does not hold.
- Jesus offers pragmatic advice to empower oppressed people. When you cannot force people to treat you justly, you can expose the injustice of the situation by acting out.

The problem with all these interpretations is that in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus in fact means exactly what he says. And so we are left with a rather troubling situation. We need to take Jesus seriously.

And if we do take him seriously, and we do take him at his word, then this teaching is very hard indeed, and can lead to all sorts of moral dilemmas. To highlight one of these dilemmas it the fact that the message could lead to a naïve giving into injustice. A silence in the face of oppression.

But perhaps on closer inspection we can start to see that Jesus teachings are not passive but actually rooted in a profound resistance, an unexpected refusal to play the opponent's adversarial game.

Put in another way, Jesus recommends a kind of moral jujitsu, a way of discipleship that seemingly does not resist an aggressor, but in doing so actually resists the underlying paradigm of hostility and contempt involved in striking a cheek, suing for a coat, or forcing someone to walk a mile in the first place. Employed in a creative and dynamic way, Jesus' teaching turns conventional wisdom on its head. It is not so much about 'submission' but rather like the great non-violent movements of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr, not a passive, victim inducing resistance to evil, but rather an active, creative non-resistance to the evildoer.

If we could grasp this way of discipleship and being church, then it would in fact have great ramifications on the way we do mission in our communities. We would be actively speaking out against oppressors, people would witness our compassion and perhaps be drawn to explore why we do, what we do.

And that is where we come to 'talking the talk.' For as profound as Jesus teaching is in today's Gospel is, if it is not grounded in the person of Jesus Christ, it is just another set of good rules to live by. For these are not new teachings, but they are completely changed by the very fact of who Jesus is. His claim in Matthew's Gospel is that he is the 'Son of God.'

And so his teaching is not just a human idea, but the very ideas of God. And because of this, Jesus does not allow us just to be passive people. But in fact he becomes our example of somebody who is not divorced from their teachings, he embodies his teachings. And to divorce Jesus from them, is to lose the greatest treasure.

For all our actions in the world are to reveal the treasure that is the love of God found in the person of Jesus Christ. And not only his love, but his saving power, His forgiveness of sins, His reconciliation to God, and His hope of eternal life.

Thinking back to the ministry conference this week. One of the reasons why Anglicans are often not good at talking about their faith is that perhaps at times we have neglected Jesus as not only a good moral teacher

but also as Saviour and Lord. We have put so much emphasis on his ethical teachings, that we have neglected his self-proclamation as the Son of God, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. For this is Good News, not that Jesus just gives us good advice to live our lives, but the profound truth that he lived, died and rose again, in order that we would know the profound love of God, the God who became one of us, and offers hope to broken lives and a broken world.

If we can, as the title of the ministry conference said, un-divorce Jesus the earthly teacher and Jesus the risen Christ in our connecting with the world, then we will be both missional and spiritual, we will both 'walk the walk' and 'talk the talk'. Showing people the love of Christ in our actions, but also sharing our hope in the words and conversations with those we meet along the way.

May God so grant us his grace to 'walk the walk' and 'talk the talk' that we may see his kingdom come, here on earth. And here in Birkenhead.