

6th Ordinary 2023 A Deuteronomy 30:15-20 1 Corinthians 3:1-9 **Matthew 5:21-37** Scott MALCOLM

You know the Bible is a very strange book. Or collection of books. 66 in all. I'm not sure if you've ever bothered to try and read it right through. I mean not just bits and pieces here and there, but right through from start to finish. Genesis to Revelation. That's when you realise just how way-out bits of it can be. I mean it's full of some amazing things too, but some of it is just weird.

A few years ago, I brought a brand-new Message Bible. I had been a guest speaker at a camp for a men's retreat and they had given me a book token as a present and so I brought a leather-bound copy of the Message.

This is it here, it's the Readers Edition, so I thought I'd do just that, read it. So, I started in Genesis and kept on going. Not that I hadn't read most of it before, but now I was making sure that I'd gotten every one of those Minor Prophets, every one of those lists of Kings and ancestors from Chronicles and Nehemiah. The laws of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. All of it, every word.

And the first thing that struck me, was, a lot of this is crazy! I mean early in Genesis we read about the Nephilim, the strange product of "sons of God" who liked the look of human women and had children by them. That's not normal! Neither are the stories of incest and rape also found there. Then in Judges, some children mock a bald man, he curses them and two bears come out of the woods and kill them all. He carries on his way. Poor old Ezekiel the Prophet has a terrible time, having to wander around naked, eat bread baked with cow dung. Hosea is required to marry someone who doesn't love him, is continually unfaithful to him, and he must stick with it.

Even in the New Testament, we get John the Baptist with his odd clothes and diet. Ananias and Sapphira, and then all this talk about hell.

I don't think anyone, even the most committed Christian person could possibly say, the Bible is not a weird book. In fact, an extremely weird book.

Which is why, if and when we do read it, we have to have a bit of a framework for how we do that.

And the Sermon on the Mount is no different from the rest of it. It is a part of the Gospel of Matthew, the first book in order of the New Testament, but not the first book written in the New Testament. That honour goes to some of the letters of Paul. But Matthew isn't even the first of the gospels to be written either. That place belongs to Mark.

So even in it's lay out the Bible is confusing.

Which brings us back to the Sermon on the Mount.

How are we to understand this?

Well I'm a believer in the idea that we must be able to make whatever it says in this collection of books liveable in the world God has placed us in. The whole idea of the gospel is that it is an attractive and appealing way to live life. Now that doesn't mean easy or protected or prosperous, but it does mean encouraging liveable, under normal circumstances.

And that's the message here in the Sermon on the Mount. This is what it looks like to be living in the Kingdom. This is Kingdom living. This is the kind of living that should produce love, joy and peace, kindness, generosity and faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

And I think, even in what appear to be some very harsh statements, Jesus gives us a clue as to how this works in these few verses from Matthew.

He continually says that the main way of understanding the Torah, or Law, is that of "intention". When the Torah or Law says something, what is God's intention in this? Torah and law are not to be addressed literally, or traditionally, Jesus says, they are to be applied with intention.

The horror of human murder is expanded out to include anger. Thou shalt not kill is not about killing so much as it is about the opposite. God's intention is that we live in restored and reconciled relationships with one another so that the extreme does not occur. We are not to let anger overcome us, we are to be forgiving.

As we said last week, these are communal texts. They apply to us as human and Christian community.

The tragic calamity of the physical act of adultery is expanded out to men lusting after women in their hearts. This is interesting because it removes the onus from the woman as being the reason men lust. Perhaps removing the temptress label from the first woman Eve. Lust is not the problem of the one lusted after, as if they are to blame, it is the problem of the one lusting!

Using lust as a reason to transgress outside of God's intention of faithfulness in relationships, is uncovered as unconscionably wicked. God's intention is that we are to be faithful in our human relationships. We are to take responsibility for our lusts and desires and deal with them. Not blame our weakness on others. We are to exercise self-control.

Divorce is the next on Jesus' list. This is interesting because in Matthew there is an added clause which doesn't occur in Mark, the earliest record of this saying. It is the clause about chastity. It may be that by the time of writing Matthew's gospel, not being able to get divorced was having a negative impact on the community. It may have been that the prospect of life long unhappy marriages where people didn't get on, loved others, or where simply unmanageable, was taking its toll.

Remember marriage like all the other things here is supposed to be an expression of the kingdom. If it's not, then it's counterproductive. God's intention is for marriage. Happy, committed and fulfilling marriage. But we all know that doesn't always work out, and sometimes, everyone is better off out of it. We are to work hard at our marriages with God's help, but we are also called to be sensible if things are bad.

Lastly, truthfulness is a crucial virtue. It doesn't mean contracts and oaths are unnecessary, but that much trouble could be avoided if we meant what we said and agreed too. Let your yes be yes and your no be no. Be honest and have some integrity.

And that's not to mention hell which will keep for another time.

God's Scriptures are a very weird collection of material. We need a framework for how we are to read them. They have been used to close the door on God rather than opening it. They have been applied to do exactly the opposite of what was intended by them.

Matthew seeks to move the people in his community away from this weirdness of taking things literally. The callousness injustice of interpreting God's laws as acts of oppression, rather than liberation. Closing God out, rather than letting God in. The church today would do well to do likewise, to proclaim with all it's might ... the intention of God's love for the world ... not God's control.

Amen.

