

Jesus meets the people

Jesus meets his ordinary followers

Matthew 5-7

When we read the bible we often concentrate on those special people such as prophets and apostles who had a very special mission. Their lives were exciting and they learnt many things about God. But in many ways their lives were exceptional, whereas most of Jesus' followers in his day and most of Jesus' followers today live ordinary lives. They have wives, husbands and children. They live in ordinary homes and go to work day by day to earn the income to support themselves and their families. So what did Jesus have to say to ordinary people?

The classic record of Jesus talking to ordinary people is the so called Sermon on the Mount.

The crowds were following Jesus so he went up a hillside, presumably to find a good site where he could be seen and heard by a large number of people. He then sat down. It was normal for Jews when preaching to sit down [*1]. Perhaps they saw it as a sign of humility. They were not to stand up looking down on those they spoke to. They were to sit down, making themselves lower than those they spoke to, or at least on the same level.

It is not my objective here to go through the sermon paragraph by paragraph and expound them all. There are plenty of books which do that. My aim is firstly to pick out a few key points and stress that Jesus is talking to ordinary people whose primary call is simply to live a Christian life in the communities where they live, and secondly to comment on the background to some of the things Jesus said.

Firstly Jesus said that people whose lives were characterised by certain attitudes of mind and ways of behaving would be blessed by God. These first nine paragraphs are commonly called the beatitudes.

The first characteristic for which people will receive a blessing is "the poor in spirit". Many interpretations are given for this. My own preference is to interpret it as those who do not have an aggressive spirit, who are not pushy in ensuring that they get their own way all the time, riding roughshod over the valid rights and wishes of others. We might contrast them with selfish people who set out to ensure that they get everything they want. They push other people aside in their arrogant drive to achieve their goals. They work their way into positions of power and use those positions to domineer over others, regardless of the needs of the weak they dominate. Selfish and arrogant people achieve what they want in this world; "the poor in spirit" however will gain the kingdom of heaven. The vision Jesus puts before them is of a future reward, not a reward in this lifetime.

The next characteristic in people which Jesus praises is those who grieve. Whatever the cause of the grief it indicates an awareness of the plight of others and an awareness of the situations in the lives of others which cause grief and sadness. Such people are open to others, they are not selfish, thinking only of their own happy situation. In modern terms we might think of those who grieve for the victims of major disasters such as earthquakes, those who grieve for the victims of human evil who live under tyrants, those who grieve with those who are afflicted by personal disasters such as illness, family break-up, unemployment and so on. These are the people who will receive consolation in the life to come.

Ultimately it is the humble who will inherit the earth, not the rapacious who seize everything that comes their way, which is what we see happening now.

Those who long for right to succeed will eventually find it.

Those who are merciful to others will find mercy from God. They do not seek to pursue their victims demanding recompense for every debt, driving home against any sign of failing or weakness. They let the other person off the hook. They recognise that there are times when they need mercy too. The opposite are those who use every failure in their opponents to press home their demands with vindictiveness. They will do anything and everything to bring down their opponents.

Then there are the pure in heart. In our usage the heart is the place of emotions, not the place of thought. We say for example “I listened to my heart not my head,” meaning I ignored what was sensible, what it was logical for me to do. I acted emotionally. When we call someone “hard-hearted” or “soft-hearted” we are referring to the instinct that drives them, not the way they think logically. When we say someone is “heart-broken” we mean that they have been severely emotionally affected by some sad event. However in the bible the heart is also the place of rational thought. In the story of Noah we read: “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil.” [Genesis 6:5] Modern translations correctly avoid the word “heart” because it does not fit the normal English idiom. The hard heart of the Pharaoh who refused to listen to Moses is a reference to his stubborn plotting and changing of his mind. So who are the pure in heart? They are those whose thoughts are pure. They do not plan to do evil things. They do not plot against others. They don’t engage in deceit and deception. They don’t tell lies to seek some advantage for themselves. They don’t engage in tricks to get their own way. They will see God, who is pure.

Those who make peace will be called sons of God. This reminds us of the saying: “Like father, like son.” Such people will be called “sons of God” because they behave like God. Harmony might well be considered the ultimate test of goodness. What is not harmony is evil.

The last two beatitudes are rather different. They don’t describe the behaviour of the blessed. They encourage those who are persecuted in some way for being upright and being followers of Jesus. Once again the focus of the reward is on the future, in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus then encourages his followers by telling them how important they are. They are like salt and light. But there is also a warning.

Salt:

“You are the salt of the earth, the ground, [*2]” said Jesus. Much of Palestine consists and consisted of barren, rocky hills. But among the rocks there are occasional deposits of salt, rock salt [*3]. Most of the rock is of little immediate value. It is just part of the crust of the earth. But the salt in the rock is different. In hot climates where people sweat more it is especially important. It is extremely precious. It is not just a matter of enhancing the taste of food. Indeed it is crucial to life. During one visit to the desert in the Sudan I visited a one-man salt producer. First he dug out the raw rock salt from a nearby hill. Then he took it back to his house in a small cart drawn by his donkey. He dissolved what would dissolve in water and poured the solution into a vat in the sun. In the heat of the sun the water evaporated to leave the salt behind. The salt was for sale. He took the undissolved material, depleted of the salt mineral, and threw it out of the house. There people walked on it as they passed. I am sure that it was this centuries’ old process that Jesus was referring to in his parable: “You are the salt of the earth. If the salt becomes depleted [*4], what can put the salt back again? It is of no use at all except to be thrown out for people to walk on.” Jesus was therefore saying that his followers are like the deposits of salt in the mountains. They are special, they are rare, not plentiful like the rest of the rock; and they have a special value. The salt itself has to be purified. The pure salt can be used. The

remnant of the process of purification is thrown away. It becomes just like the rest of the ground. It is tempting to wonder whether there was a deposit of rock salt in view of Jesus when he was speaking!

Light:

The second picture Jesus gives of his disciples is that they are light. “You are the light of the world,” he said. Jesus lived long before the days of powerful lights such as lighthouses sending their beams miles into the distance [*5]. The only light of human origin that could be seen at a distance was the multitude of small lights in houses in a town between sunset and bedtime, or the occasional fire lit as a beacon on special occasions such as to warn of an invasion. Again the lights in a town could only be seen if the town was high up, on a hill. This is why Jesus says that a town on a hill cannot be hidden. Its lights will be visible from a distance. In the smaller context of a house an oil lamp would be lit and placed high up where it would spread its light all round the room. Good works are to be the mark of Jesus’ followers, the ordinary men and women who were to be his disciples, and this would bring glory to God.

The law:

[Matthew 5:17-48]

The Jewish Bible, our Old Testament, is divided by Jews into three parts. These are called “the Law”, “the Prophets” and “the Writings”. The Law was the first five books of the Old Testament, Genesis to Deuteronomy. The Prophets included what we call the historical books, such as Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, and what we recognise as the prophets. The Writings are the remaining books. [*6]

“Don’t imagine I have come to tear up the law or the prophets. I didn’t come to tear them up but to complete them. Not a letter or part of a letter will disappear from the law until the sky and the earth disappear, until everything is done.” So said Jesus.

I can imagine many people who saw Jesus and listened to him imagining that he was opposed to the law. After all he had healed people on the Sabbath in contravention of the current interpretation of the law regarding the Sabbath. So for someone who accepted the current interpretation it was no step at all to assume that Jesus was tearing up the law. Jesus was not foolish. He could easily see what people would say, even if he did not hear them actually say it. Some people would have been outraged that Jesus should appear to be flouting the long-accepted law which they accepted had been given by God through Moses. Others were perhaps rather pleased at the thought! Freedom at last! Whatever people thought Jesus would have felt that he needed to make his position clear.

So Jesus make his position clear. “If anyone abolishes even one of these little commands and teaches other people to do the same, he will be reckoned the lowest in the kingdom of heaven.”

So Jesus made it clear that he was a true Jew who upheld the Jewish law. He might and certainly did argue with the religious leaders about the relevance of certain parts of it, and about what to do when there was conflict between the various parts of the law, such as rescuing sheep from pits or healing sick people on the Sabbath. But he had not come to set the law aside. Indeed he takes a violent swipe at the religious leaders who we must assume were behind any criticism of him on this matter: “In fact if you don’t do better than the scribes and Pharisees, you won’t even get into the kingdom of heaven.”

However the question as to whether the Jewish law applies to gentiles is quite different. For a consideration of this see my book “The Framework of Christianity - Or - Are You Party to this Contract?”

There are some detailed points worthy of note in this story:

- *1 See also Luke 4:20 where Jesus sat down to teach in the synagogue in Nazareth.
- *2 The word “earth” [Greek “ge”] is often misinterpreted here as meaning “people”, or “the whole of mankind”, or “the inhabitants of the earth”. In fact it means “earth” as opposed to “heaven”, “land” as opposed to “sea”, a particular “area of land”, such as a country, the “land” or “ground” as used for agriculture, or a particular area of cultivated land, or particular kinds of earth or minerals. [See Liddell and Scott.] In the next parable, “You are the light of the world”, a different Greek word is used [kosmos]. This is used of the whole of the universe, including man. In the Old Testament the Hebrew word “erets” is like the Greek word “ge”. Hence I would maintain that the picture Jesus is primarily describing is of the veins of rock salt in the ground as exposed in barren mountains.
- *3 See the Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2001 DVD Edition, Articles “Dead Sea” and “Rock Salt”. In a wet climate salt deposits originally near the surface have long since been leached out by rain, but in dry climates they can still be found near the surface.
- *4 “depleted”: It is difficult to find the right word to use here. The problem is to find an adjective that is suitable as a description of “salt”, that is the “salt rock” from which the salt has been extracted and also to describe people who in the picture are like the worthless salt. The Greek text has used a word normally used of people, meaning “daft, silly, foolish, stupid”. It doesn’t describe salt very well. “Depleted” is the best I can think of that fits the “depleted” salt and the “depleted” people. Jesus was probably speaking Aramaic, and presumably had a word that fitted both salt and people well.
- *5 The lighthouse Pharos in Alexandria was built about 280 B.C., but was unlikely to have been known in Palestine. The Romans started building lighthouses in the first century A.D. See the Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2001 DVD Edition, Article “Pharos of Alexandria”.
- *6 In detail, the Law [Hebrew “Torah”] is Genesis to Deuteronomy. The Early or Former Prophets are Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. The Later Prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, [not Lamentations], Ezekiel, [not Daniel], then Hosea to Malachi. The Writings are Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles.

Mount.docx