

Epiphany 6 2020 Matthew 5:21-37

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*"I say to you that everyone who becomes angry with his sister or brother shall be liable to judgement; and whoever says "Raka" (means worthless, foolish or of no account) to his brother or sister shall be liable to the council; and whoever says 'worthless reprobate' shall be liable to enter Hinnon's Valley of Fire"*

Many translations of the Bible take the Greek word, 'Gehenna' and translate it 'hell'. I.e. "everyone who becomes angry with his brother or sister shall be liable to hell".

Church tradition, for various historic reasons, has conjured up an image of Gehenna (or hell) as a place - a fiery inferno that God sends people to after they die, either bad behaviour or lack of faith. This is a poor translation and it will result in us missing the main point that Jesus is driving at, in this section of the sermon on the mount that we listen to this evening.

What we often called the "sermon on the mount" is laying out the charter, or big themes, of Jesus' teaching. The sermon on the mount parallels and supersedes, or brings to completion, Moses' teaching on a mountain, which included the 10 commandments. The audience for Jesus' teaching on the mount, is not people in general but quite specifically the 'disciples' (5:1). This is a teaching for followers of Jesus and is probably quite incomprehensible to the world in general.

So what's Jesus on about here?

One of the big themes that runs through the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) is that Jesus brings it, or inaugurates, a new type of Kingdom, which stands in contrast to the empire of this world. In Matthew it's called the Kingdom of Heaven. The Kingdom of Heaven is not primarily some place we go when we die, but is an emerging reality here on earth. The Kingdom of Heaven is what the world looks like when we are in relationship with God the Father and when God's plan for a new world is being realised – a world characterised by peace – by SHALOM.

This Kingdom of Heaven is a stark contrast with Gehenna, which although often translated 'hell' is better translated 'The Valley of Ben Hinnon – or the "valley of slaughter"'. This was a real place in Israel's history, which is referred to in Jeremiah (7:31-32); Kings (2 Kings 23:10) and Chronicles (28:3;33:6). It is the place where Israelites had conducted child sacrifice to God Mollech. It's pretty much the worst possible place imaginable. Think of children being thrown into the ovens of Auschwitz and you've got a pretty good idea of what kind of awful reality Jesus is referring to. It's the worst possible example of the primal sin of Israel which is idolatry – which shows up in the very first of the 10 commandments, from Moses's sermon on the mount.

Jesus is making a direct connection between idolatry (that is, the kind of God we commit ourselves to) and violence. If we worship a God which requires child sacrifice, we will become violent ourselves. We become what we worship (Pslam 135:18). Furthermore Jesus is bringing this question of violence down to a very close, personal and practical level. Violence is not just murder. Violence starts in our hearts with anger, and with small local disputes – which could be in our homes, churches or workplaces. Jesus is so concerned about this that he won't allow any kind of religious

evasion. That is, if you're cheesed off with someone – if someone is rubbing you up the wrong way at home or at church or at work, don't think you can't just go and say the general confession for the forgiveness of sins, and then believe that all is well in world. No – you actually need to go and talk to the person that you're angry with, or in dispute with. If you DON'T, then such things can fester and expand out – possibly even eventually to wars.

So, it's interesting that the same theme of anger and violence recurs at the end of chapter 5.

“you have heard it said, ‘you shall love your neighbour and shall hate your enemy’. Where as I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; In this way you may become children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun to rise on the wicked and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust” (5:43-45)

We might wonder about the possibility of loving our enemy. It's particularly difficult if we think of love as having warm fuzzy feelings towards someone who is a thorn in our side. But the love we are talking about is not necessarily a warm fuzzy feeling. Love is an action. We love someone by treating them with respect and going and having a yarn with them and trying to understand their point of view. As Jesus says, “go and be reconciled”. This is a very embodied action – it actually requires effort and skill. I've just been away for a week, with my friend Brendan, where we ran a one day workshop with Anglican RE teachers in Brisbane and then a couple of days with staff at Nungalinga College in Darwin, trying to help people joint up the dots between the Kingdom of peace, our image of God, and practical skills in nonviolent communication. That doesn't mean of course, I'm any good at it myself – only that I continue to try.

Chapter five ends by clearly drawing a contrast between becoming *children of our Father in heaven* (which leads to peace) on one hand, and what a world looks like when small acts of unreconciled anger are not dealt with, which can ultimately escalate into the Valley of Slaughter. We know what hell looks like – it looks like Auschwitz.

The Good news is that God sends the Holy Spirit to help us. The Spirit of Jesus, God's Holy Spirit brings us into a relationship with God through Jesus who, for our sake, became the one cast out by human wrath, crucified on the rubbish heap of human sacrificial violence, who filled that dark realm of death with light and love and conquered death from within, and who, in exchange for our violence, returned love so that the Kingdom of God can come on earth as in heaven.