

Last Sunday before Lent 2020

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“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect.”

It is often said that Jesus was a great ethical teacher. Those who wish to grant Christianity some merit without going the whole hog often offer this as a reason for its relevance today. More darkly, a certain sort of public moralist will talk about Britain’s “Judeo-Christian heritage” – and note the way that the portmanteau subsumes Judaism, with its rich tradition of moral thought parallel to Christianity, into something that often sounds a bit like a jingoistic Sunday school equivalent of ‘Our Island Story’. Even much preaching in contemporary Christianity can make Jesus into a kind of self-help guru – instagrammable advice to consider the lilies of the field and not to worry about one’s life seems to lend itself to this kind of reading. The point is the same: that Jesus gives great advice we would do well to heed.

Well, his advice this morning is pretty poor, if you ask me. How on *earth* – and I use the phrase advisedly – does one go about being perfect? And Jesus doesn’t just mean perfect in the way that my sainted and faithful grandmother is perfect, a kind of weakened metaphorical use of the word perfect to mean “without fault” – he means perfect as God is perfect. Etymologically, the word ‘perfect’ means finished or completed, and the same meaning is there in the Gospel’s Greek *τελειος*. Completed as in without any potential unrealised, without any need for further growth or learning. Used of human beings, this word meant a kind of ethical maturity; but Jesus makes clear that he means it in the way that philosophers at the time might have understand god – as the pinnacle of what it means to exist at all. That is, not just good but goodness itself; not just able to *choose* the good, but unable to be anything *other* than good in any given situation. I don’t know about you, but this doesn’t help me very much as a piece of advice when trying my *very best* to be good let alone when I’m trying my usual amount.

Given that this injunction comes at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount, the passage with which all that Judaeo-Christian morality stuff is most associated, it rather throws into unhelpful relief *all* of Jesus ethical teaching, which can only be kept, it

seems, by attaining an unrealisable standard. And simply thinking “I’ll start with just keeping the commandments” won’t cut it either. Jesus is at pains to tell us that he is not replacing the Jewish Law with something new; rather he is explaining what it takes *really* to keep the Jewish Law. As it is the law of God, it is not sufficient to manage a kind of wan imitation – “you have heard it said, ‘do not murder’, but I say to you...” It is not sufficient to refrain from killing another person, you cannot hate them either; and by a series of similar rhetorical antithesis, Matthew’s Jesus leads to the inexorable conclusion that the only way to keep – really keep – God’s law is to *be* God. That is not really advice of any kind. But it is the whole point. Jesus did not come to us to provide, even by moral example, instruction on the perfect ethical life. Rather, Jesus *was* God and therefore gives us hope that part of what it means to be human is not necessarily *not* being God. This is one of the reasons why the Fathers were so keen to establish that there is nothing missing from Jesus’ humanity where divine agency might lurk. It’s not that the second person of the Trinity resides where Jesus’ human soul might have been – or his mind or intellect or will – so that the human person of Jesus is rather like a car driven around by the logos. Jesus is the perfection of humanity – that is humanity’s perfection is to *be* God in Jesus Christ. In his life and death we see what this looks like: and it is pure, overwhelming, unflinching love. Never counting the cost, never swerving from the demands of love. Jesus’ teaching is remarkable because of how little it constitutes a realistic programme for action in the world as it is, and nowhere is that clearer than in some of the injunctions we hear today. What his teaching does point to is a radically revolutionised humanity and therefore human community. Jesus shows us that our responsibilities to one another and to God are not different things – our love for our neighbour is our love for God, our worship of God is our adoration of his image in other human beings. This is why Matthew’s ‘perfect’ is a gloss on the Levitical ‘Holy’ we heard in our reading from the Hebrew Bible: the plenitude of God dwells in us when we act in perfect love; and the only human being for whom that is true this side of Glory is Jesus Christ.

So how on earth does this benefit us? Not by our efforts to conform to his teaching, not by trying really hard to be good. Our only hope for perfection is through him, with him and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit – it is by becoming Christ ourselves, being grafted into him so that his humanity becomes our humanity. This happens pre-eminently in Baptism, where all that thwarts our journey towards perfection is rooted

out and the grace of the Holy Spirit begins the work of perfecting our human nature. This grace is stirred up throughout our lives by our participation in the sacraments of the church, most importantly when we participate in the Eucharist. We are not able to offer the perfect worship of love – yet – but Jesus Christ *is* and does constantly in heaven where he lives in the perfect communion of love with his Father. In the Eucharist he invites us to join his perfect worship, and so we offer ourselves – our souls and our bodies – on the altar with the bread and wine to become Christ, our baptismal identity stirred up so that we are filled with Christ, sharing in his self-sacrifice of love to the Father.

Our Christian journey is not one of moral effort – at least, not in the sense of berating ourselves for a failure to be something we could never be in our own power, or of imagining that if we could only summon up enough guilt for our failings we could persuade God to overlook them. It is one of taking the gifts given us through the Church to allow the Holy Spirit to undertake the work of perfection in us. It is simply making ourselves available – not working to achieve perfection but opening ourselves up to the divine work which leads us deeper into Christ and his glorious perfection. He has already fulfilled all righteousness, as he described his own baptism – it is not necessary for us to mimic that fulfilment; only to participate in it.

This all sounds lovely. But – and I can only speak for myself – I don't really perceive much progress towards perfection. Sure, I could be more faithful in coming to Mass and saying my prayers; perhaps I'm making some moderate progress here and there; but in the context of the perfection of Christ, I have a feeling that it wouldn't make very much of a difference. I feel very powerfully that I am a sinner. And thinking of some future me that is perfect in Christ is not much help because it makes me feel like the current me is somehow not desired or loved. My sins feel like part of me, not excrescencies that I can separate from my pure, acceptable self. They are constitutive of my personality, alas. And this is where it helps to remember that the perfection of God is the perfection of *love*. There is a sacrament of the Church that I haven't yet mentioned where God's love for our current, particular and sinful selves is most powerfully felt: the sacrament of reconciliation. The natural way of thinking about confessing our sins is that, if we demonstrate sufficient remorse, God will be persuaded to set them aside and give us a clean slate. There are two problems with

this, one small and one big. The small problem is that we almost immediately rack up more debt on the slate, and feel twice as bad as we did before. The big problem is that it simply is not how God is. God does not need to be persuaded to forgive us; indeed, he *could* not be because God does not change. He loves us, not in spite of our sin but *in* our sin and has already forgiven us from before the foundation of the world. It is in working through our sin – articulating it in the sure and certain knowledge of God’s love to another Christian sinner – that we discover our true identity. In this light, our besetting sins become a sure guide, not a source of shame. The failures we return to despite our best efforts show us where we most need the love of God, the dark corners where we most need to feel that we are seen and still accepted. Parts of personalities that we are using for ill but, through gentle correction, can become channels of grace. Love, not shame, is the precondition of change.

In the confessional, our sinful partner stands for all sinful Christians because she is a priest administering a sacrament of our baptismal grace. She is the whole church, the whole community of love, accepting us with joy; and, through the community of love, the God who is love reaches out to reassure and guide. Martin Luther described the baptised person as *peccator, penitens, Justus*.¹ That is: a sinner; repenting; having been justified. Yes we are sinners, but we are sinners who are already justified, already forgiven, and so our repentance is a continuous prayer of thanksgiving for the work of sanctification that the Holy Spirit performs in us because of our baptism. It is in this context that we repent; not to win forgiveness but because we are forgiven, because we are loved with a perfect love, warts and all. I encourage you, this Lent – the season where we prepare to reaffirm our baptismal identity in the risen Christ – to consider taking advantage of the wonderful fountain of grace that is the sacrament of reconciliation, a place where, like no other, we experience our new humanity as God’s beloved firstborn, full of grace and truth. Amen.

¹ See his Lectures on Romans, esp. chapters 4 & 7.