

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany: 19 February 2017

*Jesus said, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5.20).*

We'd better begin by clearing up the misunderstanding that likely took hold of us all as soon as we heard this verse spoken: Christ is not, in fact, telling his listeners to be flawless. He's not telling them to do the impossible. Those who have heard sermons in this parish the last three Sundays will remember that we are making our way through Christ's famous Sermon on the Mount, which is most definitely not about what we must do to attain a personal moral purity or righteousness. Since we started into it, we have seen that Christ's preaching about the kingdom of heaven is all about human relationships.

So coming back to this thorny verse about being perfect... First, let's admit that our culture has massive hang-ups around the word "perfect." On the one hand, we are all too aware that perfection is beyond our reach; we resent those who "think they're perfect" or who try too hard to be perfect or who seem to be so much better than us that their perceived perfection puts us to shame. On the other hand, we suffer from tendencies of perfectionism on a massive scale; we feel anxious about our work, about our parenting, about our home- and lawn-maintenance – you name it – as we strive for ideals that are forced on us, or that we think are expected of us. We always feel we are falling short. Hearing these words on the lips of Christ himself might just be enough to put us over the edge.

That brings us to the second thing we need to acknowledge: Christ was not – thankfully – speaking English. He probably was speaking Aramaic, and his words are recorded in Greek. We don't have access to his original words, but at least we can know that the Greek word here translated as "perfect" does not have the same baggage as our word "perfect." The Greek word is τέλειός, which does not really suggest absolute freedom from error or fault, but instead points to completeness and wholeness. It is related to the word that means "goal," "end," and "purpose." Equally adequate translations might include, "be complete as your heavenly Father is complete," or "be fulfilling your purpose as your heavenly Father is fulfilling his purpose." And so Christ is not offering yet another impossible standard to hang over our heads, but an approach to life and love that has real potential to bring us closer to wholeness, closer to the purpose for which we were created.

So now, the comparison to God actually begins to make a bit of sense. "Be complete, as your heavenly Father is complete." We are, after all, created in the image of God, and so our completion is to be found nowhere else except in being like God. "Be who you were created to be."

And here, as in so many other biblical texts, we are reminded that our only path to God-likeness is found in loving. We should hardly need to be commanded to love others, since this is in fact the deepest in-built need in each and every human being: to love. We were created by love and for love, and our lives are nothing without love.

So we all need to love, and we all want to love. The problem comes when we try to put this desire into action. The problem comes because we start to pick and choose whom we will love. We put our energies into loving our family, our friends, maybe our church, our community, our country – oh yeah, and ourselves – and we think that this is pretty good. We think we have fulfilled our purpose when we have gathered a modest number of lovable people around us and

manage to be fairly consistent in loving them, even when they occasionally frustrate or infuriate us.

But as Christ's illustration in this passage makes clear, this approach to love is not actually love at all. True love is seen in *this*: making the sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sending rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Rain, by the way, is good, in this context.) Love is free and indiscriminate. Love meets people's needs without regard to whether they deserve it or not. Love gives oneself for others, even when the only thanks returned are insults and hatred. Love goes to the cross at the hands of those loved. And love needs to do this; it would not be love if it didn't.

So, "if you love only those who love you" ... is this really love at all? No wonder we find ourselves in such desperate search of wholeness and purpose! Until we learn to love those outside our circles of natural affection – even our enemies – we have not really learned to love at all, and so are still far from completion, from being who we were created to be.

Of course, so many years downstream from when these words were first written, we Christians have become very nimble in dodging this difficult demand to love our enemies. We have learned to tell ourselves that we don't in fact have enemies, because we love everyone, just as we were commanded! In which case, we need only ask ourselves whom we would not welcome over for dinner to find out how much we deceive ourselves. (Because really, if you wouldn't have a person for dinner, there's no way you love them.)

Or then we say that we've tried to love our enemies, and we've only ever done good things for them, and yet they persist in disliking us, so the ball's in their court now. Not much we can do. But in this, we also dodge the command, because there is nothing in Christ's words about making your enemy into your friend. The command is to love the enemy, to seek (and desire) their good, to help them to find completion in God's loving image – regardless of whether they ever find us lovable or not.

These are indeed difficult words to heed. They should make us very uncomfortable and should awaken us to how much we fall short of the love for which we were made. But they also point to the boundless grace of God toward us in Christ. As St Paul writes, "while we were enemies [of God], we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son" (Rom. 5.10). So in Christ, we have the perfect example of what it means to love enemies: to lay down even one's life so that others might be reconciled to God. In being recipients of that undeserved love ourselves, we have a picture of how profound an impact such love can have, how it can change hearts and lives for the better. May Christ's love for us overflow abundantly to all who hate us.

Amen