

Part 4: 'Salting in Progress'

31st January 2010

An American Air Force pilot was practising high-speed manoeuvres in a jet fighter. The pilot pulled the controls back for what should have been a steep climb and plunged straight into the ground. What the pilot did not realise was that at that moment the plane was flying upside down. Scientists have conducted experiments in which people wear special inversion glasses that make everything look upside down. After a while the brain adjusts and soon everything seems the right way up. Now, you do not need to listen to the news for very long before being convinced that we are living in a totally upside down world and most people don't seem to realise, that is, until they crash.

Jesus had come into our upside down world to set it right-side up. As Jesus delivered what we call the Sermon on the Mount, he was actually speaking to a great crowd of common people who now knew themselves to be *blessed* because their lives had been touched by Jesus. They had begun to experience the life of the kingdom. The transforming and healing powers of the age to come had broken into the present because the King was there among them. The kingdom of God was truly *at hand*.

These people had been living in a society where the Scriptures had been manipulated and twisted to authorise an oppressive, though very religious, social order. In this upside down world, the rich, the educated, the well-born, the popular, the powerful and the religious had got God in their pockets. But, as Jesus delivers the Beatitudes, he tipped them out of their privileged position and raised ordinary people with no spiritual or worldly qualifications, other than that they had been touched by Jesus, into the divine fellowship of God's kingdom.

Now Jesus tells them that they are the ones who are to make life on earth manageable. They, not the brightest or the richest or the most powerful, are light and salt. God has given them 'light' – truth, love, power, so that they can be the light for their surroundings just as Jesus has brought that light into their lives. God has made them 'salt' so that they can cleanse, preserve and flavour the times through which they live. Just as all life requires light and salt, so the earth if it is to function properly needs these little people, who have none of the qualifications humans insist are necessary. As you walk into a dark house you turn on the light so that it shines over everyone. So Jesus says to those he has touched, ***'Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds, and praise your Father in heaven.'***

When you wake up to where Jesus is heading, it is no surprise that he strenuously affirms his faithfulness to the Jewish Scriptures. He hasn't come with any intention of abolishing them, breaking them, annulling them or watering them down – though he will be accused of all those things. Instead, he has come to fulfil the Scriptures. This clarification then leads to the final bold statement which is at the very heart of the sermon on the mount.

For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. v.20

To suggest that the scribes and Pharisees are not entering the kingdom would have seemed scandalous, even ridiculous. After all, these were the very people who were seen,

and certainly saw themselves, as the guardians and paragons of personal holiness and morality. Now, Jesus is suggesting that only if our righteousness exceeds theirs will we be part of his kingdom. How can we do better than them? And what does Jesus mean by *fulfil the Law*?

The answer becomes clearer with a whole series of examples that follow. Each example begins: ***You have heard that it was said*** which introduces the way Jewish tradition had interpreted the Law & the Prophets. Jesus follows that by saying: ***But I say to you...*** The scribes and Pharisees were really skilled at finding ways of reducing the demands of the Law. Jesus raises the bar and moves away from the Pharisees' emphasis on external conformity to an internal change of heart and mind.

The first example is **murder** (v.21-26). The Law clearly forbade murder. But Jesus' message of the kingdom calls people to a deeper and higher standard. So Jesus addresses the issue of anger that motivates murder and makes people insult each other. In Jesus' society and our own, yelling insults has become almost socially acceptable. It is violence with words that seeks to assassinate the character if not the body. But the kingdom of God calls us beyond simply doing no physical harm – desirable as that would be. It calls us to do no harm with words. And even more radically, it calls us to actively seek reconciliation. Being reconciled, sorting out your grievances and hurts, is more important than your religious devotions.

As the manifesto continues, Jesus applies the same pattern - ***“You have heard it said....but I say...”*** to vital issues for individuals and for society – sexuality, marriage, oaths and revenge. And each time, Jesus is calling us to a higher way of life that both fulfils the intent of the Law and exceeds the rigour of the Scribes and Pharisees. They focus on external conformity and technical perfection. This conventional religious morality – what Jesus calls *the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees* - is all about not doing external wrong; not murdering, not committing adultery, not committing divorce, not breaking sacred oaths, not seeking revenge. But the kingdom manifesto calls us to a new kind of righteousness that addresses the anger, the greed, the lust, the prejudice and the arrogance in our hearts. Instead of merely not doing wrong, our hearts must be changed so that we are motivated to do what is right. So when Jesus speaks about adultery, he makes us face the sobering truth that while we may avoid technically committing adultery, our hearts can be full of lust. If we want to live in the kingdom of God we don't just avoid adultery itself, we deal with the lust that is its root. The call of the kingdom is a call to desire and seek a genuinely pure heart.

Jesus moves on to tackle the issue of divorce in the same way (Matthew 5:31-32). He addresses men because only men could sue for divorce in that culture. But clearly it applies to both genders in our culture. So, someone can get a perfectly legal divorce so that everything is externally okay, just like someone who never commits adultery or murder. And for the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, that is completely satisfactory. But the righteousness of the kingdom requires a higher standard. You can be legal but your legal divorce causes problems for your ex-spouse and that does not fit the kingdom of God. That righteousness isn't righteous enough.

In between adultery and divorce, so Jesus is clearly still thinking about sexual fidelity, we find this strange exhortation. ***So if your eye—even if it is your good eye—causes you to lust, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your hand—even if it is your stronger hand—causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for***

you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

Matthew 5:29-30

Jesus has been suggesting that the way of the kingdom goes deeper than mere outward conformity. It deals with inner motivation and not just external behaviour. So what are we to make of this grossly superficial and external image of avoiding doing wrong by amputating body parts?

Amongst the many interpretations I have read, the one I prefer goes like this: If not doing anything wrong is your goal, that could be achieved by dismembering yourself and making those sinful actions impossible. So, remove your eye, chop off your hand. That way you will roll into heaven, albeit as a mutilated stump. The price of dismemberment would be small compared to the reward of heaven. Now, that is the logical conclusion for one who held the beliefs of the scribes and the Pharisees. Jesus reduces their argument to the absurd.

Jesus then continues his call for kingdom righteousness with an analysis of swearing oaths. You can easily imagine a fierce debate taking place between liberals and conservatives about which kinds of vows were legitimate or binding. But again the kingdom of God raises the level of discourse to a higher plane. The scribes and Pharisees had found clever ways of wriggling out of their responsibility to keep their promises. But why make vows at all? Jesus suggests that making vows can trick us into thinking we have more power than we actually have. So the kingdom of God requires more modest, simple speech.

The issue of revenge (Matthew 5:38-42) now gets the same treatment. This must have been a particularly relevant issue for a people living under Roman occupation. Conventional morality argues for appropriate and measured retaliation - *an eye for an eye*. But Jesus calls for something very different, for reconciliation. These words introduce a radical new way of responding to injustice. It is the way of non-violent resistance, conflict transformation and active peacemaking. Inspired by these very words, this has been the way of people like Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela and the people of post-genocide Ruanda.

If someone strikes you on the right cheek, they have given you a backhand slap. That's the kind of thing a person in power like a Roman soldier would do to a person they considered inferior, like a Jew. You could strike back, but that would reduce you to the same violent level as your oppressor. Or you could turn away in humiliation, but that would let your oppressor win. The Kingdom manifesto invites you to pursue a third way – to courageously *turn the other cheek*. To strike you on the left cheek, your presumably right-handed oppressor must treat you as an equal by hitting you with his fist rather than as an inferior struck with his backhand. You have shown your oppressor for the violent person he is and you have thus transcended oppression without violence or revenge.

Similarly, if someone takes you to court, as rich land-owners would often do to poor peasants who were in debt, and they want your outer garment, Jesus says to strip down and give them your underwear as well. Your generosity may leave you exposed – but your vulnerability exposes the greed and cruelty of your oppressors. Again you have risen above oppression without violence.

Again, what if a Roman soldier forces you to carry his pack for a mile, which he could legally do? By willingly taking the pack a second mile, you show yourself to be a generous,

strong, dignified and free person. The first mile may be forced, but the second mile you walk free. You have transcended your oppression.

No one is going to suggest that doing this kingdom stuff is easy. But Jesus demonstrates that there is a third way and these are just a few examples of the active, creative, transforming ways of the kingdom of God – ways which overcome violence and oppression with creativity and generosity.

This section of the Sermon on the Mount reaches its climax with the next few sentences (Matthew 5:43-48). ***"You have heard that the law of Moses says, 'Love your neighbour' and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and on the unjust, too. If you love only those who love you, what good is that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect."***

This is a passage that is often misunderstood. We imagine, as the scribes and Pharisees listening probably imagined, that when Jesus says '*Be perfect*' he means achieve external technical perfection. But it should be obvious to us by now that Jesus must mean something very different.

The kingdom of God calls us to a higher way of living. It's not just about loving friends and hating enemies. It's about loving our enemies. This is what the King does, so this is the way of the kingdom. God is good to all – including evil people. The word translated '*perfect*' can have the sense of '*inclusive*' and in Luke 6 it is replaced with the word *compassionate* or *merciful*. God's perfection is an inclusive, compassionate perfection. That's the kind of love you need to have in God's kingdom – a compassionate that transcends the old divisions of them and us, or neighbour and enemy, that loves those who do not yet love you.

Does it all seem unrealistic, too idealistic or even impossible? But what is the alternative? Whether we are talking about feuding families or feuding nations do we want more of the cycle of violence and revenge, undertaken with more and more powerful weapons. Where did it ever get us? Jesus is inviting us to believe that another way, another world is possible. He is asking us to believe that the message of his kingdom, radical and faith-stretching as it is, is the only genuinely saving message we have. It is the only hope for our world.

For use in your

Cell, Accountability Group or on your own

Bible passage – Matthew 5:13-48

Reflect on the "you have heard it said... but I say to you" parts of the manifesto. How do they relate to your life? What fresh insight have you gained? Which of these moral demands challenges you most? Is there someone to whom you need to be reconciled? Share about the challenge of being salt and light in the world. Pray for each other that you might make a difference and point people to our Father in heaven.