

Perfection?

Matthew 5.43-48 (Micah 6.6-8)

'Be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect' (Matthew 5.48)

Now this is a text to begin the new Methodist year with!

'Be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect'

It sounds just the sort of text to make us give up before we start.

Did you watch any of the Olympics this summer?

The first thing I settled to watch was the women's **synchronized diving**. Two people diving from a 3-metre board to move, do various turns and twists and then enter the water simultaneously, mirroring each other at every point.

It all happened so fast I thought that every dive was excellent ...but the commentator pointed out the flaws – one was too high at take-off, the turns were not wholly synchronized, they didn't enter the water exactly at the same time, and they didn't reach the pool absolutely vertical, they weren't the same distance from the edge of the pool on entry, and one caused more splashing than the other. After a while I found I could see these imperfections, especially if they showed the dive again in slow motion.

The Chinese women won the gold medal but even they came in for some criticism from the commentator. It seemed that perfection was the goal and everyone, including the Olympic champions, fell short of the ultimate bar. No one achieved it.

Now if you think this kind of perfection is hard, the stakes are so much higher in the words of Jesus: *'Be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect'*. This is not measuring yourself by the benchmark of human excellence, it is judging by the bar of the divine nature. Be perfect as God is perfect is the sense of the verse.

So what is this text about and what might it be saying to us?

To understand it and interpret it for ourselves we need to explore what Jesus is doing in this key section of Matthew's gospel, which we call the Sermon on the Mount. What is Jesus doing here?

1. He is proclaiming a new realm

Matthew 5 begins with the beatitudes and the first beatitude is about the kingdom of God (or kingdom of heaven as Matthew calls it) ...

Blessed are the poor in Spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven

Matthew has already told us that the message of Jesus was all about the kingdom of heaven. He has written in chapter 4 that 'After John was put in prison...'

¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (4.17)

His message was about the new realm that was breaking into the world. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is describing this new realm. He is setting out what it is like in this new world and what sort of attitudes and behaviours characterise it. He is painting a picture of this extraordinary, surprising and wonderful place that Jesus calls the kingdom of heaven.

Our text sits in a section which might be called '**old and new**'.

Jesus offers a series of contrasts introduced by a formula – ***You have heard it said ...but I say to you....*** These focus in turn on murder, adultery, bearing false witness, vengeance and who you should love. In each case Jesus seems to demand more than what was previously expected before.

- Where it was said don't murder, Jesus says if you are angry with another you are guilty.
- Where it was said don't commit adultery, Jesus says that if you look at another lustfully you have committed adultery in your heart.
- Where it was said don't swear falsely, Jesus says don't swear an oath at all – let your Yes be Yes and your No be No.

- Where it was said an eye for eye, a tooth for a tooth, Jesus says if someone sues you for your coat, give him your cloak as well.

Here, in this fifth one Jesus says that although it was said of old that you should love your neighbour and hate your enemy, he now says we should love our enemies and pray for those who do us harm.

This is easy to subscribe to in theory but much harder in practice.

I visited Pakistan a couple of years ago. There I met pastors who had acid thrown at them, pastors whose churches had been burned down, families whose children were discriminated against because they were Christian. When this happens, it is easier to get angry and do violence in return, and there are clearly those who think that their faith deems they do harm to others, but Jesus says that the faith he is proclaiming is very different.

So what is Jesus saying to his disciples?

He is saying that a new way of living is coming as God's kingdom breaks in. And it is utterly surprising because it is the opposite of the norm, the antithesis of what people expect, completely against all the natural and social inclinations of humans. He is talking about a goodness that knows no bounds; he is proclaiming a love that is unrestrained by social, political or cultural barriers; he is speaking of embracing a lifestyle capable of surprising the world. He is portraying a new way of being in the world, that is non-violent, truthful, and pure.

This is the new realm Jesus is preaching and teaching about. R S Thomas:

It's a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and love looks at them Back;
and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured By life.

It's a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with

Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.

Be perfect ... has much to do with the nature of the kingdom. It is a place where things are different.

2. He is forming a community

In Matthew 5 the crowd gathers but it is the disciples that Jesus teaches. Indeed, it is not at all clear whether the crowds hear this teaching. It may well be that Jesus deliberately takes the disciples away from the crowd, up the mountain, to explain the kingdom of heaven.

For Jesus is not simply setting out the nature of the kingdom, he is inviting the disciples to become members. He is forming a new community and asking them to be its first citizens. This will be a community with Jesus at its centre, living in the new realm of God's kingdom.

Stanley Hauerwas says:

'The sermon on the Mount is not therefore a list of requirements, but rather a description of the life of a people gathered by and around Jesus.'

Many people visit Taizé because of the spirituality they find there. Tens of thousands of people, especially young people go every year to experience God. The interesting thing is that when it began in 1949 there was no intention of making Taizé a place of pilgrimage. Rather it was seven brothers, who came together to form a new community to live out together the way of Jesus. Now 100,000 each year visit to capture something of this community's life.

Jesus is forming a new community ...

And this community is formed around, focused on and feeds on Jesus.

The call of discipleship is an invitation to live in a new community, centred on Jesus.

Our presidential theme this year is **Holiness and Justice** and a key text for us this year is Micah 6.8.

What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.

It is a rule of life, a guide to living in a faith community. It asks three simple things of us: to do justice is the first; to walk humbly with God is the third; but the middle one is the key to both.

Different in different translations of these middle words. Some say 'love mercy', some 'love kindness' and some say 'love goodness'. Actually, these words are hard to translate. If you were to translate the Hebrew literally it would be 'to love love'.

There are two words here, both of which mean love: one means human love – love for a friend or parent or spouse; the other means God's love: It is the word HESED – which we often translate as loving kindness or steadfast love. It is the always constant, always creative, always self-giving love at the heart of God.

And the basic idea is that our love is formed by focusing on God's love. When you are centred on God's self-giving love it leads you to do justice. When you are learning of the amazing love of God it leads you walk humbly. This love is the centre from which the virtues of justice and humility are inspired and empowered.

Jesus is forming a community which will be centred on God's love seen in Jesus.

To be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect, means to belong to a community that is focused around Jesus and lives in and loves the Love of God. It means to celebrate it, to experience it and be formed by it in this community. It is to take up the invitation to be part of a community which is perfect because it is formed around, focused on and feeds on Jesus.

So to speak of being perfect in this context is to speak of a new realm which Jesus is proclaiming and taking up the invitation to live in that community that he is forming.

But something else is going on here.

3. He is offering a promise

The words of our text are important. Two words are especially significant in our interpretation.

The first is the word which we translate as **perfect**. The Greek word is Telios (te,leioj). It can be translated in a number of ways but it always has a sense of 'coming to be', 'growing into', 'moving towards'. When Paul uses the word it is usually translated as 'mature' or 'maturity'.

Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature (te,leioi) = adults, grown-ups, elders (I Cor 14.20)

This idea of 'growing towards' is made stronger by a second word in this verse. It is the word we translate as 'be' as in 'be perfect'. It sounds like a command, doesn't it, but the verb form is in the future tense, so could be translated 'you will be'... so 'you will be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect' or better still, 'you will be mature, complete as your father in heaven is complete.'

In other words, this is a promise. Jesus is making a promise. The promise is related to the proclamation of the new realm, and to the invitation to be part of the Jesus community and it is a promise that you will, in this new realm, in this community, grow to be like God.

So this is a promise that in this community you will be part of a community that has its eyes set on a different goal, that looks in a different direction for happiness, that focuses and is formed by love.

Your membership of this community does not demand that you be perfect, it is not an entry requirement to be perfect, neither by joining are you instantly made perfect and you are not thrown out because you are not perfect.

Rather it says in joining you are becoming part a community that is moving always towards the love of God, feeding on it and being formed by it and in

which there is a promise that you will be made holy, you will be made whole, you will be formed in the image of God.

That is a great comfort.

I went swimming with my 4-year-old granddaughter recently. We went to a leisure pool where there were lots of splash activities – fountains and waterfalls and slides – and there was a **lazy river**. A lazy river is a circular or elliptical channel where the current carries you along. You don't have to swim much because you are pulled gently by forces in the river. Everyone moves in the same direction buoyed along by the water. It is as if the water is drawing you forwards all the time.

The new community of Jesus is being drawn forward by and towards the love of God. In this community individuals may fail but the community is going in a Godward direction. If you can't pray, you still belong to a community which prays. If you can't find love to serve and care in yourself at a particular moment you still belong to a community that loves and serves. You are carried towards the God who is forming you to be like him.

Summary

So how are we to understand this text: be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect?

- **It is signalling a new realm** in which God's love is the source and marker for living.
- **It is holding out an invitation** to be part of the new community that God is forming, a community that focuses and feeds on Jesus.
- **It is offering a promise** that those that recognise the realm and take up the invitation will be formed by God for God.

May it be so. **Amen**