# **Lent Course 2023 Session 2 The Sermon on the Mount**

You may well have already spotted that the Sermon on the Mount, arguably the best-known collection of Jesus' teachings, is a great deal longer than Luke's equivalent version, 'The Sermon on the Plain' (Luke 6.20-49). We'll be doing a bit of comparing, just to pick up on Matthew's particular take on things as compared with Luke's, and in doing so will once again be using print-outs from a book of Gospel parallels, which make the comparing much simpler.

## Introductory exercise.

In pairs, read Matthew 5.1, the scene-setting. Does it call to mind any event in the Hebrew scriptures? (If in doubt, look at Deuteronomy 4.44-5.5; Exodus 19.16-20.1)

Now compare this verse with Luke 6.20. Have you any thoughts as to why Matthew contains this introduction?

#### The Beatitudes.

1. Using the sheet, study the Matthew and Luke versions of the Beatitudes. Note any similarities. Note any differences. To whom do you think Luke is talking? What about Matthew?

Discuss this in pairs. Share your thoughts with the group.

2. Annotate vv 3-10 as follows:

Compare the 'A' verses (3, 5). Is there any great difference between 'poor in spirit' and 'meek'?

Look at the other pairs of verses. Do you notice any similar 'overlap' in these pairs?

What style of writing might we be dealing with? By way of comparison look at Psalm 8.5, 7; 9.4, 5.

We're used to poetry which *rhymes*, though that really only goes back to the influence of French. Old English poetry used *alliteration* to drive the poem along; Latin and Greek, *metre* and *stress*; Hebrew was very different and relied on *ideas*.

• The *second* line of a Hebrew poem might repeat the first line in a different way:

What is man, that you should be mindful of him: or the son of man, that you should care for him? *Ps.8.5* 

• It might *build* on the first line, taking the idea further:

For the ungodly man boasts of his heart's desire: he grasps at profit, he spurns and blasphemes the Lord. *Ps 10.3* 

• It might say the *opposite* of the first line, its mirror image:

for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.  $Ps\ 10.6$ 

Why might Jesus (or Matthew!) put the Beatitudes into poetry? When you get chance, look at the Lord's Prayer in Matthew and in Luke and see if anything strikes you there.

# 'An eye for an eye.'

An interesting passage, with only a half parallel in Luke, who doesn't have the 'You have heard it said' introduction so common in Matthew, speaking as he was to people who had heard it said in the reading of the Scriptures Sabbath by Sabbath.

There are two fascinating questions here:

- 1. is Jesus encouraging us to be doormats; and
- 2. what do we make of 'eye for eye and tooth for tooth' in the first place?

For reasons which will become obvious, we'll take that in reverse order.

Obviously, everyone is anxious to avoid saying anything nasty about Judaism, like 'Ah, the OT God of Vengeance' and so on – so what do you think it's about? Discuss in pairs, then share with the group

Now look at the next handout. It's taken from an early law-code, written (as the illustration at the top shows) in a script made by pressing a wedge-shaped stylus into wet clay (and since most of the buildings of the day were made of wood, when they burned down, hey presto! Pottery libraries!). It's called *cuneiform*, meaning, in Latin, 'wedge shaped' (*cuneius* = wedge). Original, eh?

What strikes you as the real difference between Hammurabi and (say) Leviticus 24:

Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered.

It may help if you have a look at Exodus 21:

When a slave-owner strikes the eye of a male or female slave, destroying it, the owner shall let the slave go, a free person, to compensate for the eye. If the owner knocks out a tooth of a male or female slave, the slave shall be let go, a free person, to compensate for the tooth.

Discuss in pairs, and then share your thoughts.

It's clear that the 'law of retribution' isn't a new Hebrew idea – Hammurabi is writing about 1800 BC and limits mafia-style blood feuds. Perhaps what is different is not *limitation* but *justice* – that the worth of a human being isn't linked to their status. Which would feed into our next point, for which I need a right-handed volunteer....

How does that little demonstration chime in with the earlier point about human worth? Is this key to understanding this passage? What are its implications?

### 'On Divorce'

Study the three passages offered alongside the Matthew 5 version. What do you observe? (How, by way of an aside, does this compare with John 8.4-7?)

In pairs, study Matthew 5.32-32. Note down anything which strikes you. Is there anything missing from the text which we would expect to find?

Deuteronomy 24.1 reads:

Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable\* about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house

But what does 'something objectionable' mean (\*literally 'not to find grace in his eyes')? The interpretation of the verse in was down to different schools of Rabbis; roughly, this went as follows:

- Rabbi Shammai (50BC-30AD) and his school said it meant adultery. Only adultery was a legitimate reason for divorce.
- Rabbi Hillel (C1 BC-early C1 AD) and *his* school said that it could refer to any reason why a wife lost favour with her husband. It could be her cantankerous temper, the fact that she talked to a stranger in the street, or that she burned his bread.
- Rabbi Akiva (AD 50-135) said: 'Even if he found another more beautiful than she.'

Does that add anything to your thinking? Discuss in pairs and then share with the group as you feel able.

**In the group** reflect on the following:

- What questions would you put to Jesus about his teaching?
- Is it legitimate to set aside what Jesus says? How do we stop it becoming a 'free for all'?
- What is the driving issue, to your mind, about Jesus' thinking on Divorce? Is it at odds with ours?