

The Sermon on the Mount

Part One: The Second Conversion

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THE COWARDLY desertion of Jesus by his original disciples on the occasion of his arrest and eventual death may have provided the providential catalyst which, by revealing the patent inadequacy of their ego-motivated will-power, led them to recognise what, until then, had quite escaped their grasp. Their encounter with the risen Jesus who spontaneously accepted and forgave them, without a word of recrimination, had opened their eyes to a wholly other way of being human--the way of absolute, unconditional love.

Through his resurrection, Jesus made it possible to understand his death. By understanding his death, it became possible to understand his life. The risen Jesus was a Jesus who simply forgave his murderers and everyone else implicated in his death--which is everyone. Jesus did not get ensnared in the reactive nature of human relationships. He chose to love, and so was free.

In the light of his resurrection it became clear to his earliest companions that all along he had knowingly and freely embraced the vulnerability and powerlessness of love and forgiveness. As they slowly began to integrate the sheer love offered them by Jesus and freed themselves from the pervasive and addictive power of their egos, they had gradually experienced in themselves a radical change of mindset and, with it, the power to live from love as Jesus had done. As Ezekiel had put it centuries beforehand, they had discovered within them 'a new heart and a new spirit' (*Ezekiel 36.26*).

By collating the teachings of Jesus into the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew revealed himself as a disciple who, though living a generation or two after Jesus and the original disciples, had found himself transformed by his encounter with the crucified and risen Jesus alive in the Church. His account of Jesus' teaching reflected a growing insight and on-going conversion reaching beyond self-discipline and the simple observance of moral norms to believing really in love.

While the comments of Jesus were made, no doubt, at different moments of his public ministry, and had been recorded only haphazardly in the sources from which he drew, Matthew selected and collated them masterfully.

In this examination of the first part of the Sermon on the Mount, I believe that a genuine understanding of Jesus' teaching supposes a similar radical conversion in those who wish to make sense of it today. Without that trust in love, the possibilities that the teaching takes for granted cannot really be approached seriously; nor can will-power alone muster the strength to live that vision freely and even, as Jesus promised, joyfully. It is through this lens of what some have called the 'second conversion' that I wish in this article to reflect on each of the sayings of Jesus. I hope to show how Jesus invited his audience to move beyond clear rules and accepted cultural behaviour to search for the deeper, less tangible, values beneath them,

and, empowered by the love of God, to respond to others no longer from the limiting perspectives of perfectionism and relentless self-discipline but from free, generous and undifferentiated love.

The Audience

The context of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' proclamation that 'The kingdom of heaven is close at hand' (4.17). The Sermon seeks to spell out elements of the human response to that in-breaking reality.

Jesus did not speak in a cultural vacuum. Galilee was an occupied country. His audience was the rural peasantry of Galilee. Many of them farmed their own small holdings; others were tenant farmers forced to sell out to pay debts, but still working what had been their own land; others were day labourers, working as seasonal requirements dictated or allowed. Most of them lived at or under subsistence level, many going to bed hungry each night. The regular mention in the narrative of the sick and disabled reflects the statistical consequence of endemic poverty.

Matthew, on the other hand, wrote his gospel for an urban audience, living probably in Antioch in Syria. But their poverty differed little from that of the Palestinian peasants. Throughout the Empire generally, about seventy percent of urban dwellers lived precariously at or under subsistence level.

The Kingdom of Heaven

Jesus' mention of the proximity of the kingdom of heaven fell on receptive ears. Later Jewish prophets had spoken of a coming kingdom of God. Invariably, they had envisaged it in terms of peace, and of redress for the poor and oppressed. God's preferential option was clearly for the poor. They saw salvation in terms of social relationships, and pictured it according to the only social model with which they were familiar: that of kingdom. Most of them would inevitably have thought of kingdom in political terms, despite Jesus' insistence on conversion and openness to the new.

Matthew's Sermon on the Mount addressed issues of life within this kingdom: What will it consist of? How will it take shape? Jesus did not propose a constitution or draw up an alternative code of laws. He stimulated the imagination and called forth a vision of possibilities based on his radical sense of the dignity of every person.

The Beatitudes: What Lay in Store?

The Sermon began with the Beatitudes, the first four of which immediately engaged with the social reality of the majority of listeners. The kingdom would primarily be good news for the 'poor in spirit', those who 'mourn', the 'meek' and those 'hungering and thirsting for justice' (5.3-6). These were not moral attitudes, but a description of the experience of the rural peasantry of Galilee and the urban poor of Antioch: people whose very spirits had been crushed by the might of Rome and the constant experience of oppressive taxation and the unending struggle to survive. By meekness, Jesus was not referring to personal humility, but to the habitually hopeless attitude of inferior towards superior. Truly they thirsted for a world governed by righteousness.

Drawing on the language of the prophets, Jesus assured them that God's kingdom was for them: they would be comforted; they would inherit the earth (the land); and their hopes for righteousness and justice would soon be fulfilled.

The immediate effect of Jesus' insistence of the nearness of God's kingdom would have served to set free the yearnings and to engender hope in people trapped in poverty, oppression and powerlessness. God was interested in them, as the prophets had insisted. Change was in the air. Yet, without dreams and without hope, even the exploited can be the last to move out of their poverty, and the first to resist those who disturb the *status quo*.

The Beatitudes: Personal Cooperation

Too many revolutions have involved a simple inversion of those in power and those without power. Without personal change and conversion, the same injustices prevail, whoever might be on top.

It would be impossible for God simply to impose an order of justice and peace. Any imposition 'from above' would fail to respect basic human dignity. God is not interested in the fawning of robots but in the love of free persons. God's kingdom would necessarily be a work of partnership between God and humanity: impossible without God's empowering love, empty without humans' free response. Matthew would speak of freely and deliberately 'entering' the kingdom (5.20).

The next three Beatitudes addressed precisely this question of the 'how', listing the non-negotiable essentials of 'mercy, purity of heart' and 'peace-making' (community-building and reconciling) (5.7-9). Taken together, they summarise wonderfully the unsettling newness of Jesus' insight into life in society and expose the futility of universally endemic drives of desire, rivalry and competitiveness, and the violence to which they give rise.

Roman rhetoric extolled Rome's work for peace. But Rome's peace was achieved by subjugation and force. Rome worshipped the goddess of war. Law and order favoured the wealthy and were built on self-interest, slavery and relentless exploitation of the poor. In such a world, consistent and 'across the board' mercy, purity of heart and radical peace-making were subversive.

Jesus paid the price of his insistence on mercy as the regulator of human relationships: he was condemned by the Jewish Council of priests and elders (26.3-5), collaborators of the Romans, denounced by the crowds (27.20-23), and sentenced to execution by the Roman governor (27.24-26).

As tactics to address injustice, terrorism and national security in today's world, mercy, purity of heart and Jesus' concept of peace still do not make practical sense, even to most Christians. There is no way for people to discover where Jesus could possibly be coming from without their responding to the call to the 'second conversion'.

The Beatitudes: Consequences

Against such a background, the last Beatitude makes sense. Since mercy and peace-making were of the essence of the kingdom, entry into the kingdom would require a choice for love, and, with it, the vulnerability and almost inevitable victimisation it risked. Genuine disciples

of the crucified Christ could expect criticism and persecution (5.10-11). Nothing new: similar fates had attended the Hebrew prophets before them.

What is astonishing was Jesus' invitation to 'rejoice and be glad' in face of such victimisation--a response possible only for people totally free from all co-dependence, people who had learnt to respond from their own depths and were freed and empowered to react neither from their ego-driven self-interest nor in response to the provocations of others. This was genuine human 'life to the full'.

The Mission of Disciples

Matthew immediately proceeded to emphasise the need for disciples to live confidently the message of Jesus, even though such behaviour might lead to persecution. They were to engage with their oppressive world. They were to be 'salt of the earth and light of the world' (5.13-16).

An important consideration is whether they would carry out this role as individuals or as community. Matthew did not address the issue directly, but he moved almost immediately to consider issues of relationships within community. Obviously, in his mind, the more powerful, and absolutely essential, witness to the kingdom is that of community. To use the language of the Second Vatican Council: disciples, together as community, would be sacraments of the unity of humankind (*Const. on the Church*, par. 9): they would embody it and they would bring it about.

Where is the Kingdom?

In reassuring the rural poor of Galilee that the kingdom of heaven was close at hand, and, indeed, in declaring to the poor in spirit that the kingdom of heaven was theirs, was Jesus naïve? After twenty centuries of Christians' bearing the responsibility to be salt of the earth and light of the world, is the kingdom of heaven any nearer?

The answer may depend on how we understand 'near'. There is a sense in which the kingdom is in our grasp, in a way that was not so before Jesus' death and crucifixion. At least, we know the way it can be entered--it is the way of love, not of rivalry; of vulnerability, not of violence; and of growing to see others, even enemies, not as threats but as brothers and sisters

Fulfilling the Law and the Prophets

Jesus' audience were all Jews; most of Matthew's Christian community were Jews. Most, if not all, had been exposed to the rich Hebrew scriptural tradition. Matthew was Jewish. Like other Jews, he had a profound respect for the Torah. Before proceeding to throw light on life together in community, Matthew briefly digressed to discuss the attitude of Jesus to the Jewish Torah. Until then, the Law had been the guiding beacon of life within Israel. Yet it seemed obvious that, for all its beauty, the Jewish Law, the Torah, had not managed of itself to lead to God's kingdom. It was powerless to engender and support the kind of radical change promised by Jesus.

Matthew insisted that Jesus did not abolish the Torah. Yet, he was proud that something new had come with Jesus. He saw Jesus as fulfilling the Torah--though he did not define precisely what that might mean.

With the death and resurrection of Jesus, heaven and earth had passed away and all had been accomplished (27.45,52). The Torah as external source of moral obligation had been fulfilled, though its content, in so many ways, continued to be relevant. Jesus fulfilled it by drawing from its source in the heart of redeemed humanity. As the last supper had indicated, the new covenant had been inaugurated, and, according to the prophecy of Jeremiah, God would 'put his law within them and write it on their hearts' (*Jer.* 31.31-34).

Significantly, Jesus went on to contrast the disciples' moral response to life's situations (that he saw as basic to the experience of the kingdom) to what the scribes and Pharisees had so far adopted (5.20). The scribes, essentially, were the lawyers, the experts on interpretation and application of the literal text. Obsessed with legal details, they lacked the imagination of the prophets; they were unwilling to look more deeply into the human heart, made in the image of God, and to find there the basis of all law. Pharisees recognised the inadequacy of the Torah, and sought to supplement its teachings by a series of ever more detailed directions--the 'Tradition of the elders'. Theirs was the sterile performance-focussed morality of 'try harder'. With all their differences, both groups were captive to clearly formulated laws and by-laws as sources of moral guidance and obligation. They understood the task of the 'first conversion'; but had become fixated there. Jesus would encourage neither closer scrutiny of the literal text nor multiply and fine-tune further minute regulations. He implicitly invited his disciples to adopt his approach and to discover the basis of the law--the sense of the common good written on human hearts--and to respond to life's dilemmas from there.

Illustrating Fulfilment

In a series of six examples, Matthew illustrated and applied Jesus' approach to the Torah.

Resolving Conflict (5.21-26). In the first example he extended the reach of the original prohibition of murder to embrace all negativity in human relationships, specifying anger, insult and condemnation. With two colourful illustrations he emphasised the non-negotiable need for forgiveness and reconciliation. The illustrations had the effect of parables, leaving the hearers to ask just what was he saying. 'Leave your gift before the altar' (in the Jerusalem temple), 'go back and be reconciled with your brother' (in Galilee) and only then return and 'offer your gift' (in Jerusalem): forgiveness at any cost!

How were hearers to know how seriously Jesus' injunction was to be taken? The answer could come only from the same source from which Jesus had drawn his observation: the human heart on which God's law has been written by the Spirit. Insight into the human heart would deepen only as people pursued across life the inner journey towards self-knowledge and formation of conscience.

Jesus also picked up on the prophets' constant reminder that service of God presupposes right relationships with each other. Worship of God cannot sidestep works of mercy and justice.

Why did Matthew choose this issue as his first illustration of Jesus' fulfilling the Torah? It hardly seems a serious moral matter. The problem lies precisely in the fact that people are so culturally conditioned to respond to others as rivals and threats and to see interpersonal conflict as inevitable, that they cannot imagine a society where people interact differently. Yet, if the primary instrument of the Christian responsibility to be salt of the earth and light of the world is the witness of the Christian community, it is precisely such everyday issues as

conflict resolution and constant commitment to genuine intimacy and trust that distinguish life in the kingdom from the surrounding ego-driven culture.

In today's world, it is often this lack of profound respect, not only between Christian Churches but within the Church, that reduces its attractiveness and credibility within society at large.

Women's Dignity (5.27-32). Matthew moved on from his consideration of the lack of mutual respect and trust in society, and the addictive response to control and dominate to which it gave rise, to consider one particular instance of that response: Jesus' concern for the dignity and worth of women in the Christian community. He extended the Torah's prohibition of adultery to include also the attitudes of male lust from which it flows. The lust that Jesus had in mind was the attitude that saw women as possessions, for male use, and that based human relationships on power and exploitation, rather than on mutual respect and intimacy.

Jesus then proceeded to abolish the Torah's requirement that men give to their divorced wives a certificate testifying to their divorce by calling into question the assumption on which it was based. In Jesus' mind, marriage was essentially a commitment to lifelong intimacy in which divorce should have no place.

By challenging these unquestioned patriarchal attitudes of the culture, Jesus did more than interpret the law: he abandoned it. But, unlike the Pharisees, he did not substitute for it another law of his own making. Twenty years later, Paul felt perfectly free to re-interpret the words of Jesus on divorce, though he was plainly aware of them (1 Cor.7:12-16). Like Jesus, Paul drew on the same radical demands of genuine love and sought to apply them within a mixed Jewish-Hellenistic context not envisaged by Jesus.

By its clearly counter-cultural recognition of the equal dignity of women and men, the Christian community would witness to the world the priority of intimacy over power in regulating life in society.

Human Communication (5.33-37). The intimacy presupposed in such a kingdom-community could be built only on the basis of deep trust. Against such a background, Matthew reported Jesus' insistence on honesty at all times. Like a number of Pharisees of his time, Jesus rejected the trivialisation of God's name involved in the practice of oath-taking to certify the truth. But, rather than adopt their scrupulous and casuistic substituting of other bases for oaths, he left no room for different levels of 'truth' at all. 'Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No''. Jesus' critique of the Torah came from his recognition that honest and responsible communication is indispensable for trust, as trust is essential for community.

Interactions in the Broader Community (5.38-41). Having dealt briefly with issues affecting the witness capability of the Christian community, Matthew drew on Jesus' sayings dealing with its direct interactions with the surrounding world. In a world dominated by competition, rivalry, self-interest and power, they were to be different. They were not forcibly to resist the evildoer; they were not to get caught in the endless cycle of retaliation and vengeance, from which, precisely, the world needs to be saved.

If not forcible resistance, then what? Matthew proceeded to give three instances of non-violent resistance, each involving an assertion of personal dignity, and the deliberate adoption of a stance of vulnerability in love. By such responses, disciples would challenge evildoers

and confront them with their violence, and, by such challenge, hope to conscientise and convert them.

The first illustration was of a person dismissively slapped on the right cheek (with a right-handed backhand?). The person offended was to stand tall, and to turn the left cheek to the offender (and thereby to confront the offender with the choice either deliberately and consciously to use an open hand or clenched fist, or to recognise the injustice and desist).

The second illustration was based on Roman military regulations that allowed soldiers to force local residents to carry their packs, but set the limit at one mile. By going the second mile, the conscripted resident would put the soldier in the uncertain position of being reprimanded by his commanding officer.

The third illustration used the tool of ridicule. Before the money-lender illegally demanding to hold a debtor's outer garment as pledge on a loan, the debtor was publicly to remove his inner garment and stand naked, thereby denying co-dependence, confronting the injustice, seeking to conscientise and hoping to convert the unjust offender!

Freedom to be Generous (5.42). To the three illustrations of non-violent resistance, Matthew added another of Jesus' sayings. Though it did not refer to evildoers, it continued the theme of freely chosen vulnerability: 'Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you'. In a world where most people struggled to survive below or just at subsistence level, Christian disciples, though desperately poor themselves, were to demonstrate solidarity and constant readiness to share.

The genuine needs of others are a constant reminder that love is always at a price, and that those who have been empowered to love have accepted their vulnerability and the pain involved in sharing generously.

The saying was attached awkwardly to what preceded it, and can get lost in the colourful detail of the illustrations it followed. Yet, for today's Christians, it almost serves as a litmus test of their openness to the word of Jesus. The global village has replaced the rural world of Galilee. The statistics of poverty on a world scale match closely the levels of the more localised poverty confronted by Jesus. People in the Third World beg from their comfortable neighbours in the First. Poor nations have been forced to borrow, and repay their loans, at rates that ensure their continuing repression.

Unconditional Love (5.43-48). Matthew completed his review of Jesus' fulfilment of the Torah with an explicit examination of the issue of love, on which the whole discussion so far had been based. Jesus firstly clarified the injunction to 'love your neighbour', found in the Torah; and moved on to contradict the attitude clearly expressed in various Hebrew Scriptures, though never formally enunciated as law, about hatred of Israel's (and one's own) enemies. Jesus insisted that disciples love even their enemies, and pray for those who persecute them.

Some would see this as the most distinctive and challenging of all Jesus' moral teachings. Certainly, it provides the explanation, motivation and spirit behind all that Jesus had so far said about conflict resolution, the dignity of women, trusting communication within community and non-violence.

Up to this point, although Jesus' teaching had been clear enough, he had offered no reasons why disciples should behave in the ways he indicated (other than that the merciful would receive mercy, the pure of heart would see God, and the peace-makers would be called children of God). At this stage, he explained that such behaviour reflected the approach of God; and disciples who wished to be like God, children of the Father, would find themselves drawn and empowered to act similarly.

God's love is indiscriminate. 'God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous'. Such love is not a reaction dependent on people's performance. Love flows freely from the heart of God because that is simply the way that God is. God's love is free response, not conditioned reaction. God is consistently free. God's essence is sheer love--what Matthew calls 'perfect'. Jesus calls his disciples to such freedom, and in calling them, he offers them the capacity to be such: 'Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect'.

Until love is indiscriminating, until it reaches out equally to enemies as to friends, until it is ready to accept the vulnerability implied by it, until it is prepared, in a world still governed by competitiveness, rivalry, power and violence, to be victimised by those loved, it has still to grow. Unlike the tax-collectors and Gentiles who surrounded them, and whose love tended to be restricted to those who first loved them, Christian disciples were called to the incredible freedom of spontaneous and genuinely unconditioned love.

The Way of Jesus

Such was the love mirrored by Jesus. He knew quite clearly where his choice to love would lead him--to death. He lived with constant vulnerability. He realised quite well, as the prophets before him had recognised, that a world governed by rivalry, power and violence could not cope with one who lived and preached a message of unadulterated love. It would certainly seek to destroy him. But no one could stop him loving. He chose freely to continue, even though he knew he would be victim of the world's fear and hatred.

By turning the other cheek, by giving his cloak, by going the extra mile, he stood tall; he revealed the world's endemic violence for what it was; and called and enabled people to recognise their violence, to convert and to base their lives instead on love.

Conclusion

The illustrations used by Jesus in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount were culturally conditioned; some seem 'over the top'. Their purpose was to stimulate the reflection of the hearers, and to alert them to similar possibilities in other situations they might confront. Like parables, they left listeners wondering how seriously Jesus meant to be taken. The pragmatic answer to that question is given only by listeners themselves, and will reflect the level of their own growth into the mind and heart of Jesus. Disciples' insights develop across time as their wisdom deepens. Their answers need always to be provisional. It can be disturbing and uncomfortable to cultivate within us the heart of Jesus.

Across the centuries the constant temptation has been to domesticate the radical teachings of Jesus. Perhaps that is inevitable, given that discipleship, as distinct from Church membership, is always a work in progress, and that Jesus' mind is accessed only as people grow in wisdom. This might explain why the kingdom, promised by Jesus as near, still seems so far away.

If the kingdom is still in process, it is because God will not treat human persons as non-responsible and unfree. There is no shortcut to growing responsibly and freely into love. Until a critical mass of its members embarks on the 'second conversion', the witness of the Church is doomed to be as ineffective as 'salt that has lost its taste' (5.13).