

**3rd Sunday before Lent 12 February 2017**

**Revd John McGrath**

**St Stephen's**

**Readings: 1 Corinthians 3,1 - 9 ; Matthew 5, 21- 37**

Matthew 5 is part of the Sermon on the Mount of Beatitudes. I think that Matthew deliberately contrasts the teaching of Jesus with the 10 commandments given on Mount Sinai to Moses. The 10 commandments were given in a covenant relationship between God and His people. The Israelites by keeping these commandments kept their ongoing relationship with God. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount emphasises a new covenant relationship with God by giving commandments to love. Love is the fulfilling of the law. And it is only through love that we could possibly fulfil the commands that Jesus gives. Let's contrast two of the 10 commandments with what Jesus says. In former times it was, Thou shall not commit murder and Thou shall not commit adultery. Jesus says, 'but I say to you, that if you are angry with a brother you will be liable to judgement'. And he goes on to say, 'I say to you, that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart'. Jesus speaks about judgement. Not only what we do but in a sense what we even think about doing can lead us to God's judgement. So Jesus goes on to say in hyperbole, 'If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell'.

Do you believe in God's judgement and in Heaven and Hell? There are some people who do not like the idea of Hell, but I say that you can't have one without the other. Heaven is our goal but Hell is where we could end up if we don't trust in God's grace. It is God's grace that I want to emphasise today. The collect for the day includes the words: **Almighty God, who alone can bring order to the unruly wills and passions of sinful humanity, give your people grace to love what you command and to desire what you promise.** The collect goes on to say, **that among the many changes of this world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found.** This is about focusing on our heavenly goal so as to live a truly Christian life here on earth. You may think that what Jesus tells us to be like is impossible to achieve. And you would be right. Jesus is making his disciples trust in God's transforming grace. Jesus is not telling us to try harder so that we can live a perfect life. Instead he shows us that if we rely on our own abilities it is impossible to live a perfect life here on earth. Think again of our collect. God alone can bring order to our unruly wills and passions. So we plead for God to give us grace to love what He commands and desire what He promises. God's promise is not just for heaven when we die, but to enjoy eternal life, here on earth through our faith in Jesus. In baptism we are made new creations in Christ. The former Archbishop, Rowan Williams,

wrote, **'The church is the humanity Christ has made possible**, realising by the Spirit's gift the new potential for human nature'.

Paul writes in I Corinthians, **'I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving according to human inclinations?'** God forbid that should be true of us at St Stephen's. Do you want to remain babies or do you want to be mature Christians? Are you ready to be changed by God? Christians have tried to be perfect and failed miserably. The secret of maturity in Christ is to be like a child. Children realise their dependency on adults; especially on their parents and teachers. To grow up they need the help of those who can guide them on life's path. **We need the guidance of more mature Christians.** I learn from the writings of the saints. I and they have learnt most from prayer and reading the Bible. To change we need to trust **not in our own strength** but in God's grace and transforming power. **The secret of Christian living is to cooperate with God's grace.** The Holy Spirit is given so we can reach that state of Christian maturity.

I will tell you a story of two bishops who were standing together near the Vatican in Rome. Both were faithful men of prayer who wanted to live how God wanted them to. They saw a really beautiful woman who was a prostitute. One bishop turned away to stop looking at her. He saw that the other Bishop continued to look intently at this young woman, this prostitute, and as he looked at her, tears ran down his cheeks. The Bishop who avoided looking at this girl realised how much more holy the other Bishop was. He did not gaze with lust but with compassion. No doubt he prayed for this woman who, because of something in her life, had become a prostitute. Do not compare yourself unfavourably with other Christians. Nor should you judge yourself as better than another Christian. Each of us needs to be humble enough to let God change us. I pray for myself and for all of you that we become more mature Christians and that this church of St Stephen's will feed not on spiritual milk like babies in Christ but on the solid food of faith so we show others the love of God which can change them too. Amen.