‘Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect.’

How good do Christians have to be?

Sermon in Trinity Chapel, Sunday of 4th Week, Trinity Term 2010

‘Therefore be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect.’ To call these words in the Sermon on the Mount provocative might be considered an understatement. They are profoundly shocking and seem to contradict much of what Christianity is thought to be teaching. Is not this a religion of forgiveness, mercy, and grace? Is not its message that God loves us even though we may do little to deserve it? And is it not for this reason that Christians too are enjoined not to judge, not to throw the first stone nor to focus too much on the speck in our neighbour’s eye?

Moreover, if the demand Jesus lays on us really called us to perfection, where would this leave us? Perfection, it seems, is not only impossible; as an ideal it seems really counterproductive. Where it is expected of us, in our family, in college, at work, the effect often is not only that we are disappointed, but it may as well mean that we actually under-perform. As we all know, it is good to be stretched, but only with a reasonable objective; trying to go for the impossible may prevent us from achieving what we can or could achieve. It throws us into despair, takes away any motivation because we know (or we think we know) that our attempt to perform at that standard is doomed to fail. What we expect of a good parent or teacher, then, is to propose a realistic goal; this is as true for impending exams as it is for the broader personal tasks we are facing in our lives. By demanding too much, on the other hand, chances for improvement are effectively scuppered.

2. Is this then, what Jesus was – a bad teacher who puts people off by asking them to do what is impossible for them to achieve? It seems indubitable

that Jesus, in line with the whole of the Bible, addresses critically the ways in which human beings normally think and act. We are told that we ought to be different from what we often are: honest, not disingenuous; generous, not mean; loving, not hateful; tolerant, not narrow-minded. And it is most characteristic of his rhetoric that it is not measured; he does not, for the most part, go for the realistic, pedagogical aim. He does not tell his audience that they should all try to be just a little nicer, offer a friendly good morning to their partner, a helping hand to the person next door, or a smile to their colleagues at work. His imperatives, rather, are known for their extreme character: the rich man should give away all his wealth; a woman is commended for donating her last and only coin. People are famously enjoined to go the other mile and turn the other cheek, to love not only their friends (which, as we all know, is difficult enough), but also their enemies. Whether we like it or not, then, the line about our being perfect as our heavenly father is perfect certainly is not an isolated outlier; it sums up just about perfectly the gist of much of Jesus' proclamation.

3. To avoid the conclusion that Jesus really is just a bad teacher who crushes people by demanding more than they can achieve, one might argue that he uses rhetorical hyperbole. Perhaps he does not in earnest think that we could or should do away with all our wealth; all he *really* means to tell us is that we should be a little generous. He does not seriously want us to turn the other cheek or to love our enemies; restraining our resentment and moderating our vengeful response is all he asks us to do. In this way, one can turn the preaching of Jesus into a viable ethical, social and political code; what he teaches us, it turns out, is what we all know to be right anyway, but sometimes find hard to turn into practice. For this our weakness we might then count on his forgiveness, which would so appear as a promise to those who strive to the best of their abilities – they will be compensated even if they don't fully succeed in their attempt.

4. Such an understanding of Jesus fits so well our natural idea of what religion is and why we need it that it is hardly surprising it has enjoyed such an enduring popularity throughout the history of the Church. The trouble is only that it is not really compatible with the picture of Jesus we encounter in the gospels where the radical and subversive character of his proclamation is evidently one of the reasons for his persecution and eventual execution. To see Jesus as a kind of proto-Victorian educator preaching and teaching virtues that are valuable for society means to ignore that the radical nature of his demands constantly carried the danger of undermining established social patterns and hierarchies.

Our own references to human goodness usually tend to do the opposite; they stabilise order. One reason why children at a certain age tire of hearing from their parents that they ought to be 'good' is because they feel, quite rightly, that this is just another way of saying, 'Do as you are told'. Being 'good' is thus, to some extent, tantamount to conforming to the expectations of authority in family, society, and church. We need to see this connection to understand why the radical 'goodness', witnessed in the words and actions of Jesus, is not just an extension of our normal, everyday goodness, but something very different. Judged by normal standards, Jesus' behaviour is anything but 'good': he breaks religious and civil laws, misbehaves in the temple, and causes offence by eating and feasting with people whose reputation is dubious, to say the least.

5. Yet this only seems to bring us back to our initial problem. How could we ever hope to achieve such perfection? And if we could, how desirable would this be? Subverting accepted conventions appears to have become quite a fad over recent decades so much so that the few conventions that remain should perhaps now be protected like endangered species. It certainly doesn't feel as if all this had brought the Kingdom of Heavens much closer.

The key, I should suggest, is freedom. Jesus did not break conventions of his time because he was in a mood to do so; in fact he kept most of them most of the time. He knew, however, that they could and had to be broken where the demands of neighbourly love made it necessary. Love is thus at the core; it gives the freedom to obey or disobey, to conform or resist, to accept or reject authority depending on the situation. To obtain this attitude of loving freedom is the perfection of which Jesus speaks. It is the perfection of an inner disposition that allows looking at the world around us with the gaze of love.

Achieving this, of course, is by no means easier than any form of ethical perfection. How could we ever hope to obtain an inner disposition to love? People sometimes speak of the command to love, but surely this is paradoxical. We may be commanded many things and obey; to love surely is something that cannot be brought about in such a way. It is at this point, however, that we must remember that Christianity is not in the first instance a social project for the improvement of the world; it is a faith and as such based on divine promise. This promise, which Jesus came to proclaim, is precisely the gift of love; it is an inner transformation turning us into people capable of attending to those who need us in the spirit of love.

This still leaves open the problem of why there is so little evidence that this actually happens. Christians in their majority seem to be as prone to prejudice and malice as any non-believer, and whoever thinks the churches are places of unmitigated mutual love cannot ever have known one from within. This is not to deny that the history of Christianity offers impressive examples of loving devotion in the spirit of Jesus, but whoever decides to believe the promise of the gospel today cannot rely on empirical evidence for its success, but needs as much faith as those who first followed the call to discipleship 2000 years ago.