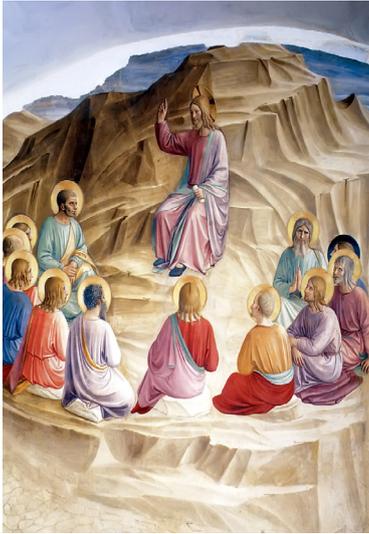


February: The Sermon on the Mount



The Sunday Gospels of this month focus on the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew has gathered the teachings of Jesus into five great discourses, of which this is the first, announcing the basic qualities required for entry into the Kingdom of Heaven – as the last, chapters 24-25 will focus on rewards and punishments in the Kingdom at the end of time. We need not suppose that they were delivered by Jesus at any one time on any one mountain; the mountain comes from Moses, when Moses gave the Law to Israel, as Jesus, seated on the mountainside, gives the Law to his followers.

Most basic of all are the eight (or perhaps nine) Beatitudes. Luke's four Beatitudes pronounce a blessing which reverses the trials of the oppressed; but Matthew's eight pronounce the qualities or attitudes of the Christian. Carefully crafted, with 'for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven' as the reward for the first and the last, they fall into two sets of four, each set ending with the favourite Matthaean quality, 'righteousness' or fulfilment of the Law of God. They are nothing to do with 'happiness', but mark those on whom the blessing of God rests. This careful patterning is typical of Matthew; but the reality appears again and again in Jesus' life and teaching: 'meekness' in his un-pompous royal entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, mercy in his forgiveness of sinners, peacemaking in all his approach. The ninth Beatitude caps them all with perseverance under persecution, the quality of taking up the Cross to follow Jesus.

After the encouraging symbols of salt and light there follow the ways in which Christian righteousness or practice of the Law of Christ must exceed the Torah of Moses (5.21-48), each with the same formula, 'you have heard it said...but I say to you', expressed with the supreme authority of Jesus. Each is different, some wider, some deeper, some more interior, but all more demanding. Again they are bracketed at beginning and end, the first on lack of love, the last on perfect love for all people, mirroring the perfect love of the Father which excludes no one. Particularly this last echoes, or even encapsulates, the whole teaching of Jesus. His way of applying the Law is always one of love, quoting the prophet Hosea, 'What I want is love, not sacrifice', putting human needs above obedience to the letter of the law of the Sabbath. Most especially, here he extends the meaning of 'your neighbour', originally meant as 'fellow member of the Chosen People' to all human beings.

Then we turn to the practice of the three great Jewish good works, almsgiving, prayer and fasting (the Gospel reading for Ash Wednesday); they are not a matter for human observation and praise, but a private tribute to the Father. In the middle – the centre of this central teaching – comes the Lord's own Prayer. We call on God as Father, and utter three petitions for the coming of God's Kingship, followed by three more for ourselves. The central position must surely show the central importance of this prayer, and within this prayer the central importance that God be seen as King, his name held holy by all and his will be done by all.

The Sermon end with teaching on the need for faith and trust in all we do, and then a flurry of Matthaean pairs of parables (narrow gate – broad road; good fruit – bad fruit; house on rock – house on sand) to seal this teaching on the Christian way to life.