

Matthew 6: 1 – 18

Have you ever used the expression ‘self-righteous’ about another person? And if you have, would you ever mean those words in a complimentary way? I doubt it – and well done if you’ve never been that rude!

But I do suspect we’ve all met people whom we would consider a lit **o.t.t.** in the way they display their righteousness and advertise their acts of goodness, kindness or whatever they think we need to know about their character. When the term is used, it is generally as a means of showing our disapproval of the public display of what might otherwise be seen as ‘good behaviour.’

There is an unwritten rule that we should be humble and secretive about the way we show kindness and generosity to others. You may boast about the good actions of others, about their generosity towards you, but not about your own actions. I think we are taught this from a very early age: both to be generous and not to boast about it. Perhaps this is the legacy of our Christian upbringing (or indeed the basis of upbringing in most religions).

Certainly we find in tonight’s reading from Matthew’s Gospel a very clear admonition from Jesus to his listeners. These words come towards the end of **The Sermon on the Mount** where the call to moral and ethical living is a high one, but one we cannot fulfil in our own right. We need God’s power to guide us and to enable us to attain righteousness. The righteousness we seek involves **three** acts:

- The way we give to others ...
- The way we pray ...
- The way we conduct rituals such as fasting ...

Firstly what we could call acts of kindness: giving to those in need: whether financially or in other ways. The BBC is currently running a programme on Radio 4 considering the subject of **kindness**. (*Revd Jane then told us a lovely story of her little grand-daughter called Elsie, helping a little boy at her school. She came home to tell her Mummy, in her childish way, that her teacher, Mrs Edwards, had told her she had been very kind to a little boy called Archie who had ‘fallen over and hurted’ himself*).

BBC Radio 4 took ‘kindness as a psychological condition’ ... I have to admit, said Revd Jane, this took me by surprise. I think I am so conditioned to accepting that kindness is both a good thing and something we must all strive for, that it seemed contrived to examine it as a psychological phenomenon! Although they have been at pains to state that it’s not a recording of trite definitions or sweet little stories, but a true research programme into the place of kindness in society, I found the first programme a little trite and definitely peppered with sweet tales of single acts. I assume it will improve. In any case it has made me look up ‘the psychology of kindness’ and to find that it is defined as an objective condition, not simply a word in a dictionary.

Quote (I think) from positive psychology.com:

“Kindness can be defined and demonstrated in a variety of fashions. Generally kindness is considered an act of generosity, compassion, empathy, or care. Kindness goes much deeper than being nice ... Kindness is more a trait or mind-set, which often manifests through behaviours, gestures, and intentional and unintentional acts. Kindness extends into how we treat ourselves, animals, the world, our valued things ... *and not all the definitions allowed of this one ... even our souls.*” *Where religious motivation is mentioned it tends to be as follows: “Many definitions of kindness will reference a god or religion. This maybe true in many religions and followers, but so much hate and violence between people over religion often challenges the genuineness. The vast majority of religious figures and organisations preach kindness, sometimes it gets lost with other messages being more important.”* The last part of the definition **PTO**

was a bit of a blow, but whether we look across the world to the intolerance and disaster engulfing Afghanistan in the name of religion, or sometimes unkindness encountered more closely to home, there is also positive truth in the idea of a legacy of kindness built in to many beliefs and for us especially into Christianity.

Having started out then as a little cynical about the topic as basis for a radio programme, I think looking at today's passage from Matthew's Gospel has in some ways made me more positive about the 'medicalization' of kindness. Jesus is saying to his listeners (and thus to us as well) ... this giving that you do should not be just because the rules say you have to, but should come from deep within you. Not, I think, as an objective response though, but very much a subjective one. You, me, we all have responsibility to respond to God's generosity to each of us by being extravagantly generous to others. That might be in giving money to good causes, whether here or abroad, by volunteering to help in local groups, in the meeting and greeting of refugees, or by taking a real interest in the disasters that unfold around us. What we do not need to do however is to 'trumpet' our personal generosity to make those around us feel inadequate, or inferior, or to make ourselves heroic.

Our kindness must be given quietly ... possibly anonymously and without any fanfare.

Secondly in considering the troubles of others we are also wise to seek wisdom and guidance from God himself and that relationship is of course developed in the way we pray. Our prayers, we are told, must be quietly and sincerely offered: there must be listening within the prayers we make: listening for the voice of God to enter into our hearts and minds. If we are too busy composing and performing our prayers then, however articulate they may be, they will have less authenticity than a prayer uttered haltingly and secretly, but flowing from a genuine heart and a real faith that God hears and understands us. It is right to pray for ourselves, but as we pray we should also be enabling the needs of others to flow from our own words. Thus offering intercession is very valid if the prayers themselves are given to allow others to pray through them.

We may, in praying for the peace of the world, give thanks to God for our own personal deliverance but we must also pray for courage to act in order to offer that same succour and safety to others. We pray to the Father for his righteousness to fill us and as we understand the coming of his kingdom for the justice and fairness it brings to fill our world. The two commandments to Love God and to love our neighbours as ourselves, shine through the Lord's Prayer when we pray it with sincerity.

And thus, thirdly, in the way we conduct ourselves, we should always be seen to be joyfully engaging in the life God has given us. Whether we are fasting, or using any other self-denial or ritual means to turn our minds fully to God, we must not display those actions as a form of superiority, or pride, but at all times keep them quietly close to hearts in the knowledge that God himself knows that we are striving to follow the ways Christ taught us ... righteousness comes through Christ not through our own efforts.

And returning to kindness for a moment ... there are so many words spoken about it:

"Human kindness has never weakened the stamina or softened the fibre of a free people. A nation does not have to be cruel to be strong." (F.D. Roosevelt)

"What wisdom can you find that is greater than kindness?" (Jean Jacques Rousseau)

"If you are humble not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love." (Mother Teresa)

Let us remember the arms that Jesus held out to those who were unloved and uncared for and unknown, but to whom he offered the kingdom ... kindness is not something we flaunt, it is something we do and it is wired into our Christian psyche which is part of our created body. It is part of the path to the righteousness found through Christ himself.

Amen.