

2021-09-12 ... 6.30pm Evensong Sermon ... Mrs Jane Rylands

Exodus 18: 13-26; Matt 7: 1-14

**'Rules for holy living'**

It seems particularly timely that the text from Exodus should come whilst Judy is on retreat. We are reminded what a heavy burden a leader carries and how it is essential that they are supported in their work so that they have time and energy to exercise their particular calling. I must say though that I'm impressed by so many in this church who give their time and skills, some in astonishing abundance, so that the missionary work we do locally can be as varied and extensive as it is. I thank you and I encourage anyone who can do more than they already do to do it – we are on God's work.

Our Matthew reading describes more about how we are to behave as God's workers.

We'll just pause a little on each section so that we can begin to absorb what Jesus says.

**I suppose the first** might seem to be the opposite of the Exodus reading: there judges were to be appointed, here we are told not to judge. **But, as you have no doubt already thought, we are talking about different things. In Exodus, the judges are to arbitrate in disputes. The judging Jesus is talking about is accusatory.** If I was to ask you about a time you ignored the plank in your own eye but called out the speck in someone else's you might not be able to recall an example. I expect, however, you could identify a time when you saw someone else ignore the plank in her eye but criticised another for the speck in theirs. You only have to look at one of the local facebook groups to see a whole lot of **'holier than thou'** stuff in action. So, no holier than thou stuff please!! See my finger wag : ))

**The next rule is one I had to think about. Cast not your pearls before swine.** But, I thought, our God is a generous God, who has offered each one of us the best. Why would you not think that what God wants is for us to offer of our best to each and everyone. And then it occurred to me that perhaps this is about knowing your neighbour. You may know that Wendy makes a fantastic peanut butter and rice krispie biscuit covered in chocolate. She knows how much I like it and how it is a spot on gift for me. But it wouldn't be a good gift for someone with a nut allergy. The other day I caught a snatch of a conversation in the street ... a young mum had been to Altrincham: 'I hated it' she said ...' I felt so out of place amongst all those big houses and Ferraris'. She obviously felt Whitchurch took some beating ... I happen to agree but many would not! A pig would be much happier with pignuts than pearls, so that is what we should favour a pig with.

The more traditional interpretation of this saying, which fits better with the first part of it, is that we're not to waste time with those who really aren't interested ... **I'd like to interpret this to say that pushing faith down someone's throat who isn't in the right spiritual place to listen and hear is never the way to approach evangelism ...** knowing and caring for our neighbour means that our approach should always be appropriate to their needs, not ours.

**Ask, seek, knock. This is about our prayers.** And there is something about persistence here. Reverse the three and you will get the description of what you hope the delivery **PTO**

person will go through before sticking a card through your door to say that they were unable to give you that item you so desperately wanted! You don't want them to give up too soon. Touch wood I have never had a problem with receiving a delivery safely but, unlike the horror stories you hear, Jesus assures us that our heavenly Father only wants to give us good things.

**'Do as you would be done by'** ... what a snappy little phrase. It took a bible commentator to make me really take notice of how wonderful an instruction this is. Michael Green says it is without parallel in the teachings of the world. However, he says, Confucius when asked for a rule of life offered: **'What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others'**. Play around with these two phrases later on and I think you'll agree that there is a world of difference between them. That proposed by Confucius can be satisfied by no action, it sets a minimal standard. Jesus's standard can never be satisfied, we can always do a little more.

The last couple of verses seem to have a bit of a sting to them. The way into the kingdom of heaven is through the narrow gate. We are probably reminded of the camel trying to get through the eye of the needle. We have to get rid of the surplus stuff we carry to pass through. But once we have passed through, the way ahead is literally heaven.

To go back to Michael Green: **'Christianity is not about being very good, or very bad, or very comfortable. It is about being in God's kingdom or staying out'**.

That's quite a scary thought especially if you have not gone through the gate and discovered that God does keep God's promises. And from the beginning of the journey it might look hard. In comfort I would like to say that I think there is much of God's kingdom before the gate that we can travel through, getting glimpses of the heavenly view beyond that will make us keener to persevere. And just as we can build up our strength with exercising, the difficult path becomes easier as we get fitter, and often the view gets better. So seeking should make us keener to find. Also, we can hear about what is ahead from travellers who have already gone on and are looking out to point the way for those who follow. When it comes to it, the actual step through the gate is surely just a small step.

Inside and outside of church – the building and the organisation – are people on all different stages of this journey. **It is up to all of us on it to practise the exercises of holy living that Jesus has given us** so that we are fit to help those around us make the journey into the kingdom with us.