

DETERMINING GOD'S GRACE (Lindfield 24 Feb 2019)

LUKE 6:27-38

At first sight today's Gospel reading could look as if Jesus was asking his disciples to become doormats – turning the other cheek, or handing over our coat as well as our shirt. However, even a cursory reading of the Gospel will show that Jesus was anything but a doormat so it is highly unlikely he intended he disciples to be so.

Rather, he is offering a way of life in which the poor and the powerless can act from a position of strength – to take an initiative which confronts their opponent and which leaves the wrong where it belongs. Their dignity does not depend on how others treat them. If we derive our self-worth externally we will almost always lose the argument. If we rely on Instagram or Facebook or Magazines or Lifestyle TV we will see a form of beauty or character traits or lifestyle that is unachievable so we stress, we imitate rather than just admire and appreciate. Whether it was Rudolph Valentino or Ingrid Bergman in the 30s to Chris Hemsworth and Lady Ga Ga today. When Valentino died women committed suicide. Today kids get tattoos of their favourite star tattooed onto their bodies or spend lots of money on fragrances, make-up or clothing with their favourite star's name to it.

Perhaps this phenomenon was even worse in Jesus' day because if you were poor, sick or disabled it was because you didn't measure up and God was punishing you! Our self-esteem or the standard by which we judge ourselves must come from a different place altogether. In this "Sermon of the Plain" we are given vital clues.

Jesus does not suggest an easy option but a radical alternative – something beyond what "even sinners" might do. It is very easy to be kind to those who are nice to us, and to love those who love us. The challenge for Christians is to go further.

Among Jesus' own disciples there were strong characters and the potential for disastrous relationships. Simon the Zealot was violently opposed to the Roman occupation and Matthew was a tax collector, someone who had become rich by, in effect, collaborating with the Romans.

Pick any of the early Churches we read of in the later New Testament and you will see a wide range and a potentially volatile mix of people. In Philippi the Christian community consisted of a wealthy woman named Lydia who hosted the Christians in her home worshipping on equal terms with the dockers from the port. In Corinth there were Christians who thought it quite OK to get their food blessed at the Temple where there were prostitutes working as Temple staff.

Just like today. Christian communities are never uniform. People hold different political views, have strong opinions on a range of social issues, belong to different groups outside the Church and yet week by week we all gather to worship God and, hopefully, to build up the Body of Christ in the community.

To do this successfully we have to employ much of the teaching in today's Gospel reading. We must cultivate qualities of compassion, forbearance and forgiveness. We have to go beyond what might be expected in a club or other organization – being willing to sacrifice

something of our own self-interest in order to create harmony. I'm not suggesting for a moment that this is easy. Maybe it's new forms of worship, new buildings, different activities, different people attending – whatever it might be. I try to ask myself, "why am I against this?" "Why doesn't this sit right with me?" Is it because it's new, different, unknown? Is it because it disrupts my comfort zone? If I opposed it what would happen? If I supported it what might happen? In one congregation a group of people threatened to leave because they stopped singing "Amen" at the end of each hymn. In another congregation when they removed 3 of the back pews to create a space for children to do activities during the Service there were howls of protest. You might think these as minor matters but others certainly didn't.

A community that demonstrates the forbearance, forgiveness and compassion that Jesus spoke of will be a powerful witness and likely attract others. Yes, we may find ourselves exploited from time to time – but as Jesus says, God is never outdone in generosity and what we give we will receive back in even greater abundance.

There is another incentive – the sting in the tail as it were. Every week we pray, "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us". What does this mean other than we are asking God to forgive us in the same way as we forgive others. Do we want God to forgive us reluctantly, grudgingly, sparingly? Do we want God to carry around resentment, deep-seated anger, a passive-aggressive demeanour towards us? Do we want God to forgive when we are "good and ready" but not before? In verses 37-38 Jesus says, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

Our measure is not Rudolph Valentino or Lady Ga Ga but Jesus. In Jesus God frees, forgives and accepts. This is the Gospel, the really good news. My salvation, my relationship with God is not based on how good I am, how theologically correct I am, how orthodox I am but on how I seek to live out my faith day by day. On top of that he promises to help me every step of the way.

AMEN
