

Sunday 23rd February 2014 – Carolyn Sanderson

Genesis 1.1 – 2.3

Romans 8.18-25

Matthew 5:38-48

Carole has just read to us our passage from St. Matthew's Gospel, and that's what we'll be focusing on, but there are one or two things to be said about our other readings first. In a way, the reading from Genesis speaks for itself. In the beginning - God. God created...the heavens and the earth, the birds and fish and animals, trees and fruits and flowers. Before there was anything else in our world, in our Universe, there was God. God separated the light from the darkness, the waters from the dry land; he made all living things - and he made us, human beings to be in his image.

I hope that goes some way towards answering one of the questions Zara asked me a couple of weeks ago. It's certainly a wonderful story for someone who is about to be baptised. At the Family Fun Day over in Broughton last week, several of the children made clay models, and I know Emma made a weathercock. (At least I think that's what it was) I don't know if she put her name on it, but certainly the children who made clay models had their names scratched into the surface. It shows who they belong to. The artist who makes something has ownership over what they make. And so a story about God making us is told to show who we belong to, whether we know it or not.

In the reading from Paul's letter to the Romans, he speaks of how God's creation, which over time has become less than perfect, less than it was when God made it, can be made new again, and that is thanks to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. I guess each one of us is a microcosm of the whole of creation: God makes each of us shiny and new, a blank canvas, and over time we spoil the canvas, the shine wears off. The message here is that renewal is possible.

But as I said, we are going to focus today on the Gospel reading from Matthew, and we find that the message is the same: what has become old and stale, and perhaps a bit grubby, can become new. We've been focusing on Matthew's Gospel ever since Christmas, and the striking thing has been how much the story of Jesus, the way Matthew tells it, reflects and recalls the story of the whole Jewish people, except that, where *they* kept going wrong, Jesus, in his earthly life and ministry, was able to show us a new way of responding to God's call.

Since the beginning of February our readings have concentrated on what has become known as the Sermon on the Mount. Moses, in the Old Testament, brought the Law – the Ten Commandments – down from Mount Sinai. Jesus, in teaching his followers about a new way of looking at the Law, also delivers it from a mountainside. It's not clear which mountain, although following on from the account of the calling of the Disciples and the healing of the sick in the Galilee region, it is likely to have been somewhere there. There is a sloping hillside, apparently, at the northwest corner of the Sea of Galilee, near Capernaum, which would have been a very suitable place to talk to the crowds that were now following Jesus.

So today, Jesus reminds his listeners of the old Law. "You have heard that it was said, "Eye for eye and tooth for tooth. But *I* tell you..." This is the pattern throughout the Sermon on the Mount - "You have heard it said - but *I* tell you..." The Law that

was given by Moses is now given anew by Jesus. Where the Law of Moses had degenerated into a narrow legalism, Jesus challenges his hearers to re-examine the real meaning and reason for the Commandments.

The business of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, of course, had its merits: it was intended to prevent an injured party from exacting disproportionate retribution. In its way, it is very fair. It's the idea that Shakespeare uses when Portia argues that Shylock is entitled to his pound of flesh, *but not an ounce more*.

Jesus goes beyond this level of fairness, though. Not just the tunic, but the cloak as well. Not a single mile, but two. He tells us, in all circumstances, to give more than the basic minimum. He even goes so far as to tell us to love our enemies. In Jesus we see the God who gives to us boundlessly, beyond generosity, who gives of his own self. Those hearing this for the first time, of course, didn't know that the Jesus they were listening to would give up his life on the cross, but we know it now. And we know that such generosity requires a response.

Zara is starting to learn about God's generous love, and over time she will learn more, through coming to church, through reading Bible stories, by praying, and by continuing to ask those wonderful, challenging questions. One thing she already knows, though, is that her parents love her, and the love of family is a good way of understanding God's love. Our capacity to love is a reflection of how we are made in God's image.

Zara's Baptism, and the promises to be made on her behalf, are a response to the God who first loved us.

The passage from St. Matthew ends with Jesus saying: ⁴⁸ *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect*. Now that is a tall order. It was bad enough being told to love our enemies, but now we are being told to do the impossible!

There is perhaps a point to be sorted out here about language. We all know what we mean by perfect, and I guess we all know that we are far from being perfect. But there is another way of looking at it.

Anyone who has struggled to learn Latin or a modern foreign language, will have encountered the perfect tense. You may have had to distinguish it from other past tenses, and been told that the perfect tense is used for an action completed in the past. The key word is completed. On the cross, Jesus completed what he came to do – *it is finished* is not a sigh of relief that it's over, but an acknowledgement that he has done what he was sent to do. He was the perfect human being who achieved perfection – completion. In our case, we are far from having completed what we are sent to do, and therefore far from perfect – but we move towards completion, with God's help.

We move towards completion, finishing, the final version of what God wants us to be, just as the Jewish nation did over a long period of time. It's a journey. For them it was a physical journey, from Egypt, through the desert, into the Promised Land, as well as a journey in understanding. Zara is about to take an important step on that journey.