

Rhetoric and Relationships

St. Brandon's

Deuteronomy 30: 15-20; Matthew 5: 21-37

12th February 2017

If you follow the prayer diary in the Newsletter, then you might know that today we are giving thanks for the high standard of teaching we receive from our weekly sermons! No pressure there then!

Suppose that Rick were to stand up and begin a sermon, "You have heard what the bishop had to say about the Parish Share ... but I say to you ...". Or, "You have heard what the house of bishops said in their recent report on *Marriage and Same Sex Relationships* ... but I say to you ...". Or even, "You have heard what the archbishop says in his new Lent book *Dethroning Mammon* ... but I say to you ...". Apart from sensing that he might be skating on somewhat thin ice, we might also think he was being a little presumptuous, even getting a little above himself.

So how did Jesus, who was not much more than half Rick's age, and almost certainly without the grey hair that confers some kind of authority (though Rick has some way to go in that regard!), get away with it? Because that's roughly what he was saying to the assembled company.¹ Well, of course, in one sense he didn't get away with it, but that's a story for another time. At the time, He did get away with it, and I think perhaps for two reasons. First, our passage is part of the Sermon on the Mount and, according to Matthew's chronology, before he preached it he had been throughout Galilee, teaching, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. And as a result He had become famous (Matt. 4: 23-25). So that when He got up and began this extensive set of teaching, which we know as the Sermon on the Mount, He already had a track record which conferred authority on His words; this was someone worth listening to, someone who could back up His words with miraculous actions.

But the second reason that He got away with it was that he was eminently listenable to. And that would have been partly because of some of the rhetorical devices He used, and probably because of the way in which He delivered much of what He said. That's why I asked Martin to read the gospel this morning, because that's how I imagine Jesus might have delivered it. And it's a source of frustration to me that we very seldom get any insight into the way in which Jesus delivered His words, or what the effect of His words was on the crowd or his disciples. They might well have been rolling around in mirth rather than, as we tend to think, sitting up in rapt attention. Because, of course, it's just as much the *way* things are said which conveys meaning as *what* is said. Did Jesus *really* mean that we should tear out our right eyes and throw them away? And if so, why have none of us obeyed Him in that regard? Or was it, as I think Martin conveyed, a rhetorical device, delivered with a twinkle in His eye, which would have had the listeners with broad grins on their faces, if not laughing out loud?

But, of course, rhetoric has a purpose. It has got a rather bad name in our day because it's become associated with unreasonable persuasion or even manipulation, and our way out of that is to dismiss it – "Oh, it's only rhetoric". If we say something is a rhetorical question, we are saying we know what the answer is without thinking about it. But rhetoric is meant to make us think. Just think how many times Jesus exaggerated – a common rhetorical device – to make His point, to make the crowds think: the speck in the other's eye and the great plank in your own; a camel going through the eye of a needle; the crazy shepherd who leaves the 99 to look for the one; and so on.

¹¹ The Readings Sheet begins "On the mountain, Jesus gathered his disciples around him", but this is from Matthew 5: 1-2, rather than 5: 21. Matthew 5: 1-2 says, "When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying ...". Thus, it is not entirely clear who "them" is, or that the crowd had vanished entirely, and only the disciples remained.

The purpose of rhetoric is not generally so that it is taken literally, but so that it wakes you up and makes you think. Let me give you one more example, but this one not from the Bible. Bill Bryson was, as many of you will know, the previous Chancellor of Durham University. Part of the role is to preside at Graduation ceremonies, and to give a speech. Bill Bryson used to suggest, somewhat tongue in cheek, that his role was to give helpful advice for their future lives to the students. His talk typically had 10 points, and while I won't go into all of them, he would begin like this: "Point 1: You are very special. You got into one of the great Universities. You have learned much, and developed much as people. You have earned your degrees, and the world is now your oyster. You are very, very special. Point 2: But not *that* special. You share this planet with 7 billion other people, and they have just as much right to its opportunities and to fulfilling lives as you have." Brilliant – a rhetorical device that really got home the point that privilege led to wider responsibilities.

So what was Jesus trying to get home with the rhetorical device which He used four times in this passage, "You have heard that it was said ... but I say to you"? Well, part of what He was trying to get across was that He was not usurping the Mosaic Law by which good Jews tried to live – He had said, just before our passage, that He had come to fulfil the law not abolish it. But He was trying to take them back to what the law was really all about, to the spirit of the law if you like, not what it had become, the letter of the law under the scribes and Pharisees.

And yet He made it sound as though each of the "But I say to you" laid down impossible ethical standards – so that we are apparently damned for being angry; for insulting someone; for not being reconciled before getting to court; for looking at a woman with lust (oh come on, it's just locker room talk, after all); for divorce unless unchastity is involved; for making an oath even with good intentions. Surely not? But what's behind the rhetoric? What's Jesus trying to get us to take seriously by exaggerating almost beyond belief ("You will be thrown into the hell of fire"; "Tear out your right eye"; "Cut off your right hand").

And what Jesus is getting at in all of these instances is how important other people and our relationships with them are, how far we should go to preserve them, what we should do if they break down. Don't be angry; don't insult other people; be reconciled to one another, particularly before you come to the altar pretending you can be reconciled with God without sorting it out with the other person first; sort out disputes before they get to a court of law. It's not "just locker room talk"; it's fundamentally disrespectful of women, as many women and some men have pointed out. Be a person of integrity so that others can trust your word, because in that way you are being respectful of them. In other words, the priority, in so far as it lies in our power to do so, is to live in harmonious, loving relationship with one another, and to seek reconciliation where things have gone wrong. That, I think, is what Jesus is really trying to get across in His own inimitable style.

But, of course, there is another relationship with which we should be concerned, and there is another bit of rhetoric in our readings today which draws attention to it. Here is Moses towards the end of his life, making a valedictory speech to the Israelites before they cross the Jordan into the Promised Land:

"I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days ..."

Shakespeare would have been pushed to better it; it is a wonderful piece of rhetoric. But just like Jesus, Moses is, of course, making a very serious point. Our relationship with God is a very serious business. It is, in this case quite literally, a matter of life and death. There are conditions attached, and Moses doesn't pull any punches in laying out what they are. And nor does he pull any punches when he sets out the alternative:

“If your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land ...”

Wonderful rhetoric again. But the point of the rhetoric is to stir our hearts, to make us think, to force a decision. So am I for God, as revealed to us in Jesus, or not? Am I for other people or not? Will I seek to live my life in such a way that I take seriously my relationship with God, or not? Will I seek to live my life in such a way that I take seriously my relationships with other people, so that, in so far as it lies in my power to do so, I live in harmonious, loving relationship with all others, and seek reconciliation where things have gone wrong? For in that way lies life, and in the other way lies death.

Today, then, and to end with an attempted rhetorical flourish on my part, I have set before you life and death.

Which will you choose?

Amen.