Reject all selfish living

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Epiphany + 7A – Matt. 5 38-48

In the *Sermon on the Mount (SoM)*, Jesus is talking to his followers; to us. Jesus is teaching us how he wants us to live as the community of people we call the Church. His teaching is deeply challenging for mature Christians and brand new ones. Jesus gives us many confronting teachings which unsettle us very deeply.

It's not for nothing that John Stott called the *SoM* a manifesto for a Christian counter culture: turn the other cheek; give more to those who take from you; go the extra mile, give to all who beg or want to borrow from you; love your enemies; be indiscriminately good to all, just like God is – be like God. If the Church truly embodied all the actions and attitudes Jesus describes in the *SoM*, we'd be radically different from every other culture on earth. The Church would truly reflect the character, the courage, the example and the love of Christ. But we resist.

American Baptist minister Amy Butler tells how *one Sunday, instead of preaching a sermon she'd written, she decided to 'preach' the SoM – three full chapters with no breaks, the words of Jesus. In coffee hour after worship, several people came up to her to tell her they really did not like or agree with some of the parts of her sermon that day. Three chapters. Read from the Bible. The words of JESUS.*

This is not an isolated incident. I've experienced the same reaction in Europe and here too. The *SoM* calls us to such a different way of being that we really struggle with it. We know it's right to be peaceful, generous, compassionate, to speak out for justice, to turn the other cheek and not retaliate, not to judge others, to follow the golden rule: all

of that. But doing all that makes you incredibly vulnerable, and we fear being taken for mugs. Imagine what life would be like for such push-overs! Actually we don't have to imagine it; just remember what happened to Jesus.

Our choice is to follow him and risk hurt to share his love, or to cave in to market forces. Some parts of the Church are market driven. Their message is barely distinguishable from the advertising fantasies of our surrounding culture.

In the *SoM*, Jesus calls us to be distinct. We hear that call most distinctly and most provokingly in our baptismal liturgy. I was talking with a friend last week who talked about how confronting they and others find some of the words at the baptismal presentation. *Do you reject selfish living, and all that is false and unjust?* ***I reject them all.*** *Do you renounce Satan and all evil?* ***I renounce all that is evil.***

It's very uncompromising language and we might shrink from it. But if you think about the consequences of selfish living, dishonesty and injustice, that's what we should be shrinking from: global and national inequities in the basic necessities of life, preventable famines, wars, enslavement and violation of children, women and first nations people, vulnerable workers being deliberately used as the consumables in production processes, and our ecological catastrophe – all from selfish living.

At our baptism, we're all called to reject those ways of being; to renounce that evil. Babies have sponsors promising to help them do that. And as a Church family, we receive and welcome new Christians into a community where *we* have all made those commitments. The community of Christ is supposed to reject that evil: we're called to build a haven where new Christians are safe to grow and flourish. We're called to be different; distinct; in the world, but not of it. A gift to the world.

Imagine if we did have that integrity; everywhere. Imagine that every poor, displaced, vulnerable, abused person could approach any church, any Christian household, and be sure of receiving relief from their misery. Imagine if every criminal could approach any church, any Christian household and find the acceptance and support needed to turn around and live freely as a follower of Jesus; not because they or we had earned it, but just because *God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.*

The *SoM* is bewildering; challenging. And we'll arrived at the season of Lent only one chapter into it. Let's agree to continue to read it; to struggle with it and to argue with it; and to let Jesus' words continue to challenge us to remember what kind of community he has called us to be. Amen