**7th Per Annum, 2025**

Sometimes people wonder how practical Our Lord’s advice is in the Sermon on the Mount: “Love your enemies.” Really? That seems extreme. “Bless those who curse you.” That just seems perverse. “Give to everyone who begs from you” is open to some serious prudential criticism, no?

Now for me the odd thing in this passage is that Our Lord seems to offer two different rationales for acting like this. First, He says, “as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.” It’s not His invention, that ‘Golden Rule’ – it crops up everywhere – the basic idea that if everyone did as they would be done by, nobody would be done by as they didn’t want.

But it doesn’t fit terribly well, does it? I mean, do our enemies really want to be *loved*? Not retaliated against, sure, but *loved*? That, I think goes beyond the Golden Rule, and to understand that injunction, we have to wait for Our Lord’s second reason: “love your enemies, and do good […] and you will be sons of the Most High, for He is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.”

Anyone can live by the Golden Rule, doing unto others as they would have others do unto them. It’s a good rule, but it’s not particularly imaginative. It’s a human rule, if you like, quid-pro-quo, I scratch your back and you scratch mine. If we follow it, doubtless, we can be good humans. But what Jesus offers us is the Golden Rule *plus*. Something which *isn’t* human, but which *is* divine. If we follow *that* rule, it’s only because we are, in some sense, divine ourselves.

“You will be sons of the Most High,” says Jesus, because that is how God acts, making the sun rise of the just and the unjust alike, pouring out His blessings even on the most unworthy, never ceasing to love, never impatient of being merciful, always ready to forgive, far beyond the bounds of mortal nature.

And we are offered a participation in that divine superfluity, the holy excessiveness of God’s love. Jesus doesn’t come to make us good people according to the standard of the world. He isn’t satisfied with making us ‘good’ people. He comes to make us Sons and Daughters of God Most High. He wants us to be *holy* people.

And there’s the rub, because we’re not. Left to our own devices, we’re distinctly *un*holy people, definitely earthy, stubbornly like the dust from which we’re made. How cold we be otherwise? We descend from the first Adam, “from the earth, a man of dust.” We bear his image, and we are like him, natural men, sinful. Whilst we bear that image, which we are only natural men and women, we have no hope of holiness.

What we need is another go, and in Jesus Christ, we get it. “The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust,” that’s us, “and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven.” And marvellous to say, that’s us, too.

At the creation of Adam, he became “a living being,” and in the Incarnation Christ became a “life-giving spirit.” Our translation doesn’t do us great favours here, because S. Paul is using two words – *ψυχή* and *πνεῦμα* – which both mean ‘spirit,’ ‘breath,’ ‘soul’. He’s pointing out that Adam was a living soul, and the men of earth who bear his image, who come after him, have only natural, not spiritual life. But Christ, Who becomes a life-*giving* spirit, can communicate His spiritual life to others, to make them live spiritually as well.

I have good news. This has already happened. In our baptisms, we have been “conformed to the image” of the Son of God, we have received a sacred character which can never be taken away from us. We have begun to bear “the image of the man of heaven.” Those of us who have been confirmed have received the Holy Spirit, the communication of God’s life. And here at the altar we come to receive the lord’s Body and Blood, His Soul and Divinity, so that by taking Him into ourselves, we may be taken up into Him, conformed to His image afresh.

All we have to do – and this is the hard part – is live up to that. Because we aren’t finished yet. S. Paul says that “we *shall* bear the image of the men of heaven,” because that image is not yet perfect in us, won’t be perfect until the Resurrection, when our mortal nature puts on immortality, but that’s the epistle next week, so stay tuned. In the meantime we wrestle between earth and heaven, the natural and the spiritual, our greed and God’s grace.

 So how do we move forward? By trying, in the power of the Spirit we have received, to allow God to conform us more and more to the image of His Son. “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven.” These are divine things, mercy, forgiveness, but the supernatural life in us – the life of the Spirit – makes it possible for us to do what human nature alone cannot do.

There’s comfort in that, but also challenge, because we who have received so much, who are offered so much – “good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over” – ought to live up to the high calling that we have received, ought to show forth the hope in which we live, so that when this earth passes away, we might have put off our dusty images, and put on the image of the man of heaven, Jesus Christ Our Lord.