

MATTHEW 5:38-48
SECOND MILE PEOPLE

Jenny was one of a family of fourteen children. As a child, she was clever with her fingers. As a little girl at school, one day the teacher said “draw something from your imagination”; Jenny was in her element and she set to work eagerly, her fingers carefully creating a drawing. The teacher came and was amazed: “Why child, you are a genius!” She went home thrilled, being praised from the crowd she was not used to that. She told the story to her family; her big brother laughed and said “you didn’t hear properly; it was not ‘genius’, but jenny-ass!” How pleased he was at his pun, but the light went out in the little girl’s eyes, her dream tumbled. Jenny grew up and became a Christian and then later a missionary in China and she settled in a city where there had been a succession of missionaries before her; they shared a house and its property as the others had moved on. One day, one of the old missionaries announced that she was coming back and would want the house and furniture back. What would Jenny do? It was hers by right, but she called the local carpenter and had him make an identical set of furniture, and charge it to her though she could scarce afford it and she gave the old lady back her furniture.

Jenny’s story is one in a book called *Second Mile People*, stories of people who have loved and gone beyond what might be expected of them in their love for Jesus and in their care of others. Things they didn’t need to do, they did! A little girl who might well have been scarred for life by her big brother’s attempt to be clever at her expense, yet her heart had learned to love in a way that went beyond what was necessary into the realms of what is good and kind and Christ-like. She embodies a set of values that we admire and perhaps admire from a distance, and think that special people like missionaries can be like that, but actually this is a set of values that we are all called to live by. This is what it means to be a disciple, to learn how to be someone like this.

I put this in contrast with what I see in the world around me. So much of our world is about power, pride and arrogance, getting my own way, putting others down like the big brother did in our story and finding it funny or smart. Decisions have been made to restrict the extent to which we care for the weak and powerless in our world and our nation is changed. The culture in which we live is a “me-first” culture in which people clearly put themselves first, second and last and in which people often not think about others at all. The Primary school engaged in a process about the rights of the child, sponsored by the United Nations. It is a good process and I can see why it is needed across the world, that the rights of children should be highlighted, as children are very much oppressed. The unintended result of the process here is to create a group of children who know their rights very well, but not the responsibilities that balance them up. The whole culture of our society is like that: “I know my rights!” but we’re not so sure about any kind of responsibility that goes with that assertion.

Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount has a very different set of values. Matthew chapters 5-7 bring together Jesus’ teaching about values and the kind of people we should be; we saw some of that last week and we see some more today. “*I tell...*” (*Matthew 5:20*) It seems not possible to surpass the Pharisees, until we see that Jesus is taking us deeper; we surpass by going to the attitudes that lie behind the actions and certainly what we see today is all about attitudes. There are six examples of what that looks like and last week we considered four of these examples, and today we consider the remaining two. There is a pattern: “*You have... But I say...*” and Jesus takes something that people will already know, then leads them to a new way of thinking; it is all about how to be the right kind of people.

“*You have...*” (*Matthew 5:38*) This is an established Old Testament principle and something we recognise in our built-in sense of justice. But we need to be careful how we use it: it was set up in the Old Testament to make sure that the legal punishment didn’t exceed the crime. If “X did this, then the punishment was set and there could be no more!” It certainly wasn’t

meant to be a means of revenge: “So and so cheated me! Wait till I get even!” This is a natural reaction, but wrong and is not justified by this “eye for eye” principle! *“But I...” (Matthew 5:39)* and Jesus gives four examples of people who do good things to people who hurt them: turn the other cheek, give them your coat; go the second mile; give to people who ask. These are all examples of people who go above and beyond what “duty” might suggest, or what “I need to do!” These are people who look out for the welfare and well-being of others above and beyond what the call of duty might suggest, but who love in a sacrificial way.

What are my rights? If you hit me, I have the right to hit you back; if you shout at me, I have the right to shout back; if you make demands on me, then I have the right to make equally compelling demands on you. That’s what my rights tell me! Here is Jesus suggesting that to love and care for others, there are times when we need to give up our rights. Rather than hitting back, Jesus calls us to look after the well-being of the person who hits us; to give above and beyond what is required of us; to do more for someone in need than we “have” to do; to give sacrificially for the good of others. You see the different attitude that Jesus commends? It is very different from the way of the world!

“You have...” (Matthew 5:43) The first half of that saying is an Old Testament command to love you neighbour. Indeed, the Old Testament had a whole set of laws to care for and look after poor people in Israel, the widow, the orphan and the stranger and alien, the foreigner. They are all to be cared for and provided for; love your neighbour. Nowhere does the Old Testament tell us to hate our enemy; that is a logical follow-on made up by the Pharisees: “if the Bible tells us to love our neighbour, then that is the person we know and who lives beside us; so logically, we are to hate the person who is not our neighbour!” *“But I...” (Matthew 5:44)* Who is my neighbour? My neighbour is anyone that I see to be in need; maybe my neighbour is the person who is my enemy otherwise, but is still someone whose good and whose well-being I am to seek and care about! This takes us away from the tick-box that says “I’ve done that; I’ve been nice to Mrs Y!” into being the right kind of person, a loving person, a person who loves and care for the person in front of me who is weak and vulnerable, no matter who that person may be.

This is what God is like; so this is what we are to be like. *“love your...” (Matthew 5:44f)* As we said earlier, the Father’s love is for everyone and is full of patience, goodness, kindness, and compassion. Because the Father is like this, we are to be like this too! *“Be perfect...” (Matthew 5:48)* Now there’s a goal to aim at! God’s love for world is perfect; the whole story of the Bible is washed through with the love that God has for us and for the world, a love that is full of patience and kindness, a generous love, compassion. He has other qualities too, but none that take away from the quality of His love for us. As He has loved us, so we should learn to love others; as the Father is patient, we need to learn patience; as the Father is forgiving, we need to learn to forgive those who do us down; as God is full of compassion for the needs of poor and weak and vulnerable people, so we need to have compassion for the needs of others too. This is not a tick-box exercise in which we say “Done that once, don’t need to do it again!” No, this is about the kind of people we are, consistent, persevering in our love for the people we meet, no matter who they are!

This is dangerous! Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians chapter 3 that there are people who see us follow Jesus and think we are fools! Reading the Sermon the Mount and hearing this sermon, you might think that this is sheer madness, that all we are doing is turning ourselves into doormats for the world, that others will just walk all over us and we will lie there and let them! Our role model in life is ... who? For us it should be Jesus! He is a role model who came as a servant, who washed His disciples’ feet, who went to the cross and then was raised; whose pathway to glory was by the humility of the cross. That is our role model for life, for being disciples; it was the way Jesus went and it is dangerous; people will call us fools; we will be thought mad by those who don’t understand.

Let's show the world a different way. What will our children and grandchildren grow up thinking? That the only way to live is to shout loudly on Twitter because the one who shouts most loudly wins the argument? Is that the only set of values there is? There are people see that economics is the only argument in town; people are discounted because can't contribute and are seen as a waste of space? Will we show the world a different set of values? That people who are weak and poor are to be cared for? That people who are oppressed are to be set free and we are to fight for their rights and their freedom? Is retaliation the best and only way to deal with the bully, or that to love and care for the needs of bully is just as important? Here is a whole new set of values by which we are called to live, and our "me-generation" world needs to see love like this embodied in us.

Are we Second-mile people? It's quite a challenge! Do we know our rights and stand on them, come what may? Or do we love people in need beyond the sense of duty? There are lots of stories of Second-mile people, people who love and keep loving, no matter the cost; people inspired by, guided by Jesus, who love people in need no matter who they are. We have a chance to write our own stories of being Second-Mile people, not to show off, but to love and care for others, in the name and spirit of Jesus. Will we be Second-mile people, who love as Jesus loved, who care as Jesus cared, who give as Jesus gave? Jenny is described as a nobody; everybody thought her a nobody, she became a Second-mile person and her story lives on!