

**Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity 2021**

**(12.09.2021) - Choral Evensong**

**Exodus 18: 13 – 26; Matthew 7: 1 – 14**

The game I like to play looking at the Bible readings we have set for services is trying to work out the connection between the two, why some committee has thought they ought to be read together. I hope I'm wrong in thinking that the only connection between this evening's readings is that the word judgment appears in both of them, in the Exodus in an approving way and in Matthew in a disapproving way. I hope we're not meant to think there's some sort of contradiction between them that needs resolving.

There is no contradiction because the two are completely different sorts of judgment. In Exodus it's about the need, in a growing society, to have an increasingly sophisticated and devolved system of dispute resolution. That's a good thing, and it's

necessary. In Matthew it's about the besetting human sin of being judgmental.

I say it's a besetting sin, but even then we have to be careful. There is a good sense of being able to make judgments. It's good to be able to judge between right and wrong, between wisdom and folly and between the sort of people we want to cultivate as friends and the sort who are best avoided. What we want to avoid is judgmentalism.

That's what the passage in Matthew this evening begins with: don't be judgmental. There then follows a list of other proverbs or pieces of good advice. You could dismiss them as simply being examples of homely wisdom that anybody in any context could give. But of course we receive them as Holy Scripture, so there's got to be more to them than that. And there is.

Towards the end of the passage there is what might be the most trite and obvious piece of advice of all: do to others as you would have them do to you. It's the piece of advice that nobody can disagree with. It's the Golden Rule. The holy texts of all world religions have it some form or other. And that's why it's very useful in Interfaith events to use it and demonstrate what we have in common. Well of course we all have that in common, because it's plain obvious.

But Matthew's Gospel completes the sentence by saying: "[D]o to others as you would have them do to you; *for this is the law and the prophets.*" Now, if you really know your Bible, that phrase will be ringing bells for you. We've heard it before in Matthew's Gospel. Two whole chapters earlier Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil."

That's fairly near the outset of what we call the Sermon on the Mount. This evening's phrase comes fairly near

the end of that massive wedge of teaching in Matthew's Gospel that spans over two chapters. The references to the law and the prophets bracket that teaching. All that has followed the first reference are examples of the fulfilment of the law and the prophets; and the second reference to the law and the prophets is the conclusion of all that teaching material. And the Golden Rule isn't just a platitude: it's a generalised, summative way of wrapping it all up.

Scholars tend not to think that the Sermon on the Mount occurred as one historical event. Rather the community that edited Matthew's Gospel and put it together as we receive it made a catalogue, if you like, or created a compendium of the sort of things Jesus taught and put them all together in a discourse within the narrative of the Gospel. And there's a common theme. The theme is about the priority of God's grace. God's grace wins. But it doesn't win by beating the law and the prophets: it wins by fulfilling them. And

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when God's grace wins, it flows out of us by altering our behaviours and attitudes.

So when Matthew's Gospel says "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged," that's not just a piece of homely advice your granny might give you as you hang on to her apron whilst she makes apple pies. It's an exhortation to allow God's grace to flow through you. And that is easier said than done. It can't be achieved by dint of human determination. It can only come about by persistently seeking God's grace.

Amen.