

Sermon – 27 September 2010 (St. Andrew's)

The Sermon – ‘Lines in the Sand’

*May the True Word move swiftly from the Ear to the Heart,
and from the Heart to the World around You*

It probably wasn't very long ago when you last opened the refrigerator door, and found food that had gone spoilt. Do you remember your reaction? ... perhaps sadness, maybe a trifle annoyed – a sense of loss, perhaps, that your favourite yummy dish wasn't going to materialize as envisaged on that day? How did the food spoil? Was it left unattended/neglected too long? Was it mis-handled (left at room temperature too long) prior to being put back? Or maybe it was previously prepared ... and just forgotten? I wonder sometimes if God's view of our potential to fall into sin isn't a bit like that ... disappointment, anticipation ... sadness at our ways.

In the lead-up Gospel readings, we heard several powerful lessons – such as, how greatness is obtained through service (v. 35-37) about how the way to become great in the kingdom of God is by serving the least among you (v. 41) - about how the path to knowing God and Salvation is found through humble service to those who cannot serve you back. That was a lesson the disciples needed to hear - it is also a lesson that we need in our day, in a world where too many want to occupy the role of chief and far too few have a servant's heart.

In offering these lessons, Jesus issues a series of stern warnings to His disciples. These verses use harsh, no-nonsense language that cautions us to be careful how we live our lives. As I read these passages, it seems to me that these words were not intended to induce comfort through easy acquisition ... leading to complacency; for it is true, that the word of God will comfort the afflicted, but it will also afflict the comfortable. Jesus is drawing 'lines in the sand' here, and we are *strongly* encouraged to take notice.

Like the disciples, the modern church has become somewhat comfortable in this world – perhaps even complacent. Jesus knew that His disciples needed to be shocked into becoming the men He had saved them to be. He knows the same thing about us. Left to ourselves, we will amount to little in the eyes of God. So,

every now and then the Lord has to shake us up to get our attention, and it seems to me that is what today's readings are in part designed to do.

When teaching to those who would 'offend', that is to *scandalize* the word of God, Jesus pulls no punches in presenting some clear principles and consequences to those who would turn their back to God, and to His salvation. He is specifically referring to those who would lead others into sin - Jesus teaches that it is a very serious matter.

How is it that believers can cause others to stumble? Jesus understands this matter very well, and he specifically points out that we influence others:

1. ***By directly tempting others to sin*** – for which there are numerous examples throughout the Bible – Eve, Aaron, Jeroboam, and the Pharisees.
2. ***By Indirectly tempting others to sin*** – For example, when we treat others in an insensitive; unloving and unkind way we can cause them to sin through rebellion, arising from a sense of injure or rejection.
3. ***People can be led into sin by example*** – If a believer who is weak in the faith sees a respected believer commit a sin, that observing believer could fall into sin by following that poor example. (Ill. **1 Thes. 5:22; 1 Tim. 4:12**). Similarly, we can mis-direct others by failing to share the riches of Christ with new believers; by failing in our discipleship to them, with the result that they remain weak and never grow up in the loving embrace of the Christian faith. In effect, by failing to give them the spiritual food they need, leaving them to spiritually 'starve' in the midst of Christian plenty! How sad is that?

Finally, we can distort the true message of the love of God through the utterance of false doctrine, although the definition of 'true' vs 'false' doctrine has swerved wildly throughout the history of the Church – just as it does today in face of issues such as same-sex blessings and ecumenical outreach across faiths. In such matters we do well to refrain from personal judgement, and turn instead to the examples and listen to the parables of our Lord Jesus Christ, for whom no one, regardless of the perceived severity of their offence or condition, was estranged from the love of God if they turn to Him with a faithful and repentant heart.

One of the fathers of the Early Church in the 2nd century was Origen, who was an early advocate for the idea that no amount of surgery on the outside will cure a spiritual problem on the inside! Man does not need a change on the outside; man

needs a change of heart as the foremost object of Christian repentance and, not coincidentally, the storage chamber for God's love! When taken together, Jesus is teaching us how we are to deal with our sins. When temptation to sin comes into our lives, we must deal with it consistently and decisively!

So, what are the consequences for ignoring Jesus' teachings in these matters? In this, Jesus raises the spectre of "hell" – a word that comes from the word "Gehenna". Gehenna was a place in the Valley of Hinnom near Jerusalem. In ancient times it had been a site devoted to pagan worship. It was here that the people of Israel had sacrificed their children to the false gods of the Canaanites. King Josiah tore down the pagan altars and desecrated the site, turning it into a garbage dump. By Jesus' day Gehenna was a horrible place! Fires burned there continually. Wild dogs roamed the dump, feeding on the carcasses of animals and criminals. The insane and other outcasts lived there as well. It was a fitting description of what Hell will be like.

Jesus says that Hell will be characterized by two terrible realities, quoting **Isa. 66:24** from which he tells us that people in Hell will suffer in two terrible ways. First, He teaches that "their worm dieth not..." , and secondly that "the fire is not quenched." Some literalists would suggest that this passage refers to actual worms and fire in Hell – but I think not. I think that He is speaking about the internal torments man will suffer through death in a state of Hell. The state of 'hell' is reserved for those who will remember every failed opportunity they had to be saved. They will remember the love and grace of God. They will remember the cross and the empty tomb. They will be reminded for all eternity that the loss of Salvation need not have been ... that there was a different possibility ... and an opportunity forever lost.

The two verses that close this chapter are among the most difficult in the New Testament to interpret. But, I think we can understand what they are saying to us, if we take them in their natural context. In all of these verses Jesus is talking to His people. He is talking to the people of God. First, in verse 42, Jesus warns His people against offending weaker believers. Second, in verses 43-48, Jesus warns His people to avoid the terrible and tragic consequences of sin. He is not saying that a believer can lose his or her salvation; He is saying that sin is a destroyer and

that it must be handled ruthlessly. In these verses, Jesus warns His people that serving Him will require sacrifice and purity.

Finally, in verse 50, Jesus says, “Salt is good!” And so it is! Salt was a valuable commodity in that day. Salt was often placed into wounds to help them heal and stop the spread of corruption. Salt was a preservative, a flavouring, an antiseptic, and a currency. Salt in our day is pure and it does not lose its flavour. In that day, it was often contaminated with other minerals and after a short time salt would develop a terrible flavour and could only be thrown away. Jesus then says, “Have salt in yourselves...” In this context Jesus is telling us that if we are truly the children of God, then we should act like and live like children of God. He is telling us, as His followers, that if we are going to be His servants, we can expect God to send trials to purify us. We are expected to embrace these trials and be steadfast - to be ‘salt and light’ to a world that desperately needs what believers in a Christian community strive to understand and achieve – a unreserved love of God, together with an unconditional love for one another!

Amen