



LIVING HONOURABLY

KATHLEEN RUSHTON gives insight into the community life Jesus describes in Matthew 5:13-37.

Jesus's words in Matthew 5:13-37 are taken from the two-chapter Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7). Leading up to the sermon, we read that Jesus has moved throughout Galilee "teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every kind of disease and sickness" (Mt 4:23). "Great crowds" followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and beyond the Jordan.

Significance of Sermon on the Mountain

We read "*seeing the crowds, Jesus went up the mountain; and after he sat down on the ground, on the earth, his disciples came to him. Then, opening his mouth, he began to teach them*" (Mt 5:1-2). The crowds inspired Jesus's sermon — tax collectors, peasants, those with leprosy, sickness, disabilities, those possessed by

demons, small farmers, labourers, artisans, widows, women, children. They, like all Jews, lived under Roman occupation and exploitation.

And as Jews they would recognise a *mountain* as a place of revelation (eg, Ex 19:3) and as a place where people learn of God's new age and ways (eg, Is 2:3). Jesus *sat down*. He took the posture of a rabbi about to give an authoritative teaching. *His disciples came to him*. They form his audience. His sermon applies to all disciples — the 12 called during Jesus's ministry, the wider group of disciples and all who will become disciples (Mt 28:19) through the Church.

Jesus Becomes Interpreter of Scripture

The beatitudes (Mt 5:1-16) form the foundation of Jesus's sermon. The repeated "Blessed are . . .", which introduces states of being not obviously blessed, can draw our attention away from the radical nature of the community Jesus is describing. A better translation is "How honourable are . . ." or "How full of honour are . . .". Warren Carter, a specialist in the Gospel of

Matthew, explains that the beatitudes show us conditions and behaviours that "God values or finds honourable, and which therefore the community of disciples is also to value and esteem". Jesus speaks to disciples about those God finds honourable in the light of a new future that will come about through God's power and faithfulness. All disciples are to live in an inclusive, non-competitive, non-grasping way.

Jesus comes to "fulfil the scriptures" (Mt 1:22-23; 2:15). In the beatitudes Jesus cites and evokes biblical verses and images. Earlier he has not related his teaching to the Scriptures. But in the Sermon Jesus is establishing that he is an authoritative interpreter of the Torah. He does not come to destroy but to fulfil "the Torah and the prophets" (Mt 5:17-20).

He is different from the Pharisees and the Scribes who govern in alliance with Rome and do not promote change and reform. Their interests lie in keeping the unjust hierarchical structure of society in place. And Jesus challenges them: "you ... have neglected the weightier matters of the Torah: justice and mercy and faith" (Mt 23:23).

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Pointers to Community Life

In the section Mt 5:21-48 Jesus offers six pointers to a life imbued in God's present and future reign. They concern human relationships. Each begins with a statement "you have heard it said" followed by a command introduced by "but I say to you". Each refers to right behaviour beginning in the heart and developed as an attitude. The heart is where decisions are made (Mt 15:18-20). Jesus goes to the heart of the matter in describing how the "honourable" community lives.

The first pointer (Mt 5:21-26) deals with hostility between people. A person is to work on their anger in order to make good relationships. And if a disciple goes to worship God and remembers their brother or sister has something against them they are stretched not only to deal with their own feelings of anger but also to reach out to the other who is feeling aggrieved.

The second pointer is about sexual behaviour (5:27-30). Adultery was forbidden (Ex 20:14). But sexuality is to do with the whole person and concerns an understanding from the heart. To shock hearers into a new way of thinking Jesus uses exaggerated commands which are not to be taken literally – eg, tearing out one's eyes, cutting off one's hand.

The third pointer is about divorce – albeit the effect of male-initiated divorce of the time on those involved (Mt 5:31-32).

The fourth pointer addresses faithfulness and honesty in relationships (Mt 5:33-37). Trust and transparency should exist within the honourable community. This makes it unnecessary for a practice of taking oaths.

For Us Now

What might inspire our vision of action for inclusive, wholehearted, honourable communities? We can reflect on Matthew's gospel passage in relation to our own lives. And we can look for good examples of those living an honourable life.

This month is the 30-year anniversary of Nelson Mandela's release from prison. He campaigned against apartheid in South Africa,

where the majority of the population was oppressed because of their skin colour. His release February 1990 after a 27-year imprisonment came about through the intense domestic and international pressure of individuals and groups on the South African government.

Freed, Mandela with the people imagined and worked towards a new South Africa: an inclusive "rainbow" community. Through their Truth and Reconciliation Commission government agents and individuals acknowledged the gross injustice and unspeakable acts perpetuated on the people. The initiative was to bring about a new community way of living.

Trust and transparency should exist within the honourable community.

Jean Vanier, who died last year, began a community movement based on the principle that all humans are sacred and those with disabilities should be appreciated and treated with human dignity. His L'Arche communities are committed to abled and disabled living together.

The vision of these two leaders for change would not have been put into practice without ordinary people – like us – understanding and supporting their dreams.

We know of many blocks to community at regional, national and world levels – for example modern slavery, gender inequality, child poverty, inactivity about causes of climate change – and we can feel powerless to effect change and overwhelmed by the enormity of the problems. The very basic triple A principles – Agency, Access and Action – may give us a method for engaging for change.

Agency refers to having or nurturing the understanding that as individuals and as Church we can do something about these global concerns.

Access means we need to become informed and educated on the issues, their root causes and core concerns.

And action means we need to do something about them within our particular sphere of influence. This could be talking about the issue in our family and among our friends. It could be joining a community or national group. It could be using our influence in the national or international arena.

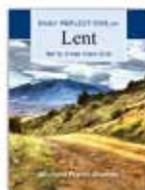
One of my spheres of influence is through this monthly Scripture column. I find that my study of the scriptural passage unearths new insights for me and hopefully opens insights about discipleship for readers. 

Reading: 9 and 16 February

RL 5th and 6th Sundays of Ordinary Time – Mt 5:13-16 and 5:17-37

RCL 5th and 6th Sundays after Epiphany – Mt 5:13-20 and 5:21-37

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