

3rd Sunday before Lent 2011

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Matthew 5:38-48

You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy says the Lord to the Israelites, through Moses; *Be perfect...as your heavenly Father is perfect* says Jesus to his disciples on the mountain. Though perhaps not comfortable to hear, those biblical injunctions from both the Old *and* New Testaments are important to hold in mind. It's very easy to become rather casual in our worship, and rather blasé about approaching Almighty God either in church, or our individual prayers. We can tend to think "this is my church – I feel very at home here....God knows I can't ever achieve perfection – he accepts me just as I am". There's nothing wrong or untrue about any of those statements as far as they go, but if we settle into that attitude with too much complacency it can obscure from us the majesty and breadth of God, and 'domesticate' and shrink our faith so that, instead of our remembering that God made us in his image, we end up making God in ours, manufacturing a religion that merely suits our needs and aspirations (and giving no end of fuel, incidentally, to celebrity atheists like Richard Dawkins). In short, our God can become too small, too petty.

What is holiness? Essentially, it's a quality set-apart from the everyday, the mediocre and the commonplace, something that provokes in us a sense of wonder and of beauty – a moral or spiritual excellence to which we are drawn. Though a complete definition of holiness might be hard to reach, it's significant that we always tend to know when we've encountered it *in people*. I'm talking about true holiness here, of course, and not that off-putting, competitive 'holier than thou', which occasionally rears its head in church groups. Holy people may or may not be technically 'perfect' (more likely not), but something about their nature makes us feel better for their company, attracting us to them, and it has a humbling effect on us. This is why the idea of 'the holy' lies at the heart of all religions, and why it's a recurring theme in Christian worship. At the Eucharistic Prayer we invoke the Holiness of God – 'Holy Lord' three times in the Sanctus. Most importantly, perhaps, is that running through all Christian worship is the idea that God's holiness is something we must not just behold, but seek for ourselves; hence the hymn – based on a verse that recurs in the psalms – 'O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness'. Like the Israelites before us, who were meant to be a race 'set apart' by God, we in the church are to be 'a holy people'. Sometimes when the bread and wine are offered to the congregation just before Communion we use the words 'God's holy gifts for

God's holy people'. It could be an interesting exercise to note the references to 'holy' you find in your service booklet[s] today.

If you're observant you'll notice that certain verses are missing from that passage we heard from Leviticus, and it might make you curious as to whether anything more embarrassing has been expurgated! What was cut from our reading was partly reference to some of the other 10 commandments that we're familiar with: honouring our parents, keeping the Sabbath day holy, and not falling into idolatry and serving other Gods. The rest of it referred to the primitive principle of offering burnt sacrifices to God, and offering them in just the right way. That has, of course, little relevance to us, because even by the period before Jesus, the Jewish prophets had already begun to refine the idea of 'sacrifice' as meaning that, rather than burnt offerings, actually *living lives which please God* was what mattered. The later prophet Micah, for example, said that holiness required the Israelites to 'do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before God' – and that's above all what we find required of us today in our first reading and Gospel. The concept of Holiness in our Bible reaches its climax in the life, and teaching, of Jesus of Nazareth – the One who perhaps more than anyone, before or since, magnetised others into following him by his sheer presence and example. One of the most radical and authoritative aspects of Jesus' teaching is his *cancelling*, as now irrelevant, certain principles of revenge and retribution we find taught elsewhere in the Book of Leviticus; for example, the idea that those who maim others should suffer the same injury in return – 'eye for eye, tooth for tooth'. We should remember that use of parables is never far away in Jesus' teaching, so that when he matches the bald image of gouging out eyes, and extracting teeth, with talk of offering your other cheek to be struck, and giving your cloak when sued for your coat, we don't need to imagine that we're required to behave like doormats and lose our own God-given dignity. What he's speaking of is above all about compassion and forgiveness – praying for our enemies rather than wishing them harm or violence. Justice is to be maintained, but it's a justice of restoration, rather than retribution, as we remember that we are **all** constantly in need, and in receipt, of God's forgiveness.

As we remarked at the start, the command to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, *is* challenging. But we work it out only with God's help, as Jesus says, that we 'may be children of our Father in heaven' – revealing through our dealings with others that 'family likeness' with God who, after all, *makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.*