Setting The Bar High

Canonbie United & Liddesdale 16th January 2014
Order of Service
Canonbie United & Liddesdale 16th January 2014

Call to worship       Upward
Hymn                 CH4 518 Lift Up Your Hearts!
Approach            Gifts Of Challenge
Address             Gas Station Attendant
Address             Guitar Practice
Hymn                 CH4 621 Spirit Of Jesus
Reading(s):          Psalm 119:1-8
                      Matthew 5:21-37
Hymn                 CH4 513 Courage Brother! Do Not Stumble
Intercession         Rising To The Challenge
Offering             Wonderfully Made
Hymn                 CH4 255 Father Hear The Prayer We Offer
Sermon               Setting The Bar High
Hymn                 CH4 519 Love Divine, All Loves Excelling
Benediction          Growing Children
Call to worship

Upward raise your hearts
For the love of God calls you
Upward raise your prayers
For the love of God hears you
Upward raise your minds
Upward raise your eyes
Upward raise your voices
Reach and touch The Lord
“Lift up your hearts!” We lift them, Lord, to Thee;  
Here at Thy feet none other may we see;  
“Lift up your hearts!” E’en so, with one accord,  
We lift them up, we lift them to the Lord.

Above the level of the former years,  
The mire of sin, the slough of guilty fears,  
The mist of doubt, the blight of love’s decay,  
O Lord of Light, lift all our hearts today!

Lift every gift that Thou Thyself hast given;  
Low lies the best till lifted up to heaven;  
Low lie the bounding heart, the teeming brain,  
Till, sent from God, they mount to God again.

Then, as the trumpet call, in after years,  
“Lift up your hearts!” rings pealing in our ears,  
Still shall those hearts respond, with full accord  
“We lift them up, we lift them to the Lord!”
Approach

Gifts Of Challenge

Lord God we praise you for all that you have given us
For the gifts of intelligence and reason
You have not only made all that is and all that will ever be
You have given us the power to understand your creation
To harness the forces of nature
To reshape the world around us
Lord God we praise you for all that you have given us
For the gifts of compassion and understanding
You have not only made us beings of passion and feeling
You have given us the power to feel for each other
To know when others are hurting
To understand their pain
Lord we praise you for all that you have given us
And confess that we have not risen to the challenge that comes with your gifts
We have used our reason to excuse our failings
Rather than rising to the challenge to be better
We have harnessed the forces of nature to build weapons
We most value inventions that make our lives easier
We have not risen to the challenge that comes with your gifts
We have not used our compassion as we should
We have found ways to exclude folk from our care
The benefit claimant and the asylum seeker
The addict and the criminal
Anyone who threatens our comfort or our wealth
Lord forgive us….

Lord you have given us gifts of challenge
And the temptation is always to misuse them
May your son, who knew temptation, be ever with us
Lord strengthen us to meet your challenge
To do what is right, rather than what is easy or comfortable
To walk the road to Calvary with our saviour, your son
There’s a story that Thomas Wheeler, CEO of the Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company, tells on himself: He and his wife were driving along an interstate highway when he noticed that their car was low on gas. Wheeler got off the highway at the next exit and soon found a rundown gas station with just one gas pump. He asked the lone attendant to fill the tank and check the oil, then went for a little walk around the station to stretch his legs.

As he was returning to the car, he noticed that the attendant and his wife were engaged in an animated conversation. The conversation stopped as he paid the attendant. But as he was getting back into the car, he saw the attendant wave and heard him say, “It was great talking to you.”

As they drove out of the station, Wheeler asked his wife if she knew the man. She readily admitted she did. They had gone to high school together and had dated steadily for about a year.

“Boy, were you lucky that I came along,” bragged Wheeler. “If you had married him, you’d be the wife of a gas station attendant instead of the wife of a chief executive officer.”

“My dear,” replied his wife, “if I had married him, he’d be the chief executive officer and you’d be the gas station attendant.”
(Show a guitar - electric for preference)

Anyone ever played a guitar? Anyone want to try?

(Let them have a wee shot. Then do something flashy with it)

Can you do that? I can. Does that mean I’m cleverer than you? Does it mean I’m more talented? No. I’ve been practising for thirty-five years. If you practise guitar that long, you could be as good as I am now. Probably better. There are some things in life we aren’t brilliant at straight away. You try to get a little bit better at it every day. Football’s like that too. David Beckham got to be really good at football by practising. He got a little bit better at it every day.

Sometimes, when you read the Bible, you get the feeling God wants you to do really difficult things; like loving people who hate you. Or not being too worried about how much money you’ve got and to concentrate on God. These are hard things to do. Not many people can do them straightaway. But if you practise being kind and loving to people. If you practise concentrating on God by praying and reading about Jesus, then you get a little bit better at it every day. And that’s all that God really wants from you. That you try every day to love him and each other a little bit more.
Hymn

Spirit of Jesus, if love my neighbour
Out of my knowledge, leisure, power or wealth
Help me to understand the shame and anger
Of helplessness that hates my power to help

And if, when I have answered need with kindness
My neighbour rises, wakened from despair
Keep me from flinching when the cry for justice
Requires of me the changes that I fear

If I am hugging safety or possessions
Uncurl my spirit as your love prevails
To join my neighbours, work for liberation
And find my freedom at the mark of nails
Reading(s): Psalm 119:1-8

Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD. Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart, who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways. You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently. O that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes! Then I shall not be put to shame, having my eyes fixed on all your commandments. I will praise you with an upright heart, when I learn your righteous ordinances. I will observe your statutes; do not utterly forsake me.

Matthew 5:21-37

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a
divorced woman commits adultery.

“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.
Courage brother! do not stumble
Though thy path be dark as night;
There’s a star to guide the humble:
‘Trust in God and do the right’
Let the road be rough and dreary
And its end far out of sight
Foot it bravely; strong or weary
‘Trust in God and do the right’

Perish policy and cunning
Perish all that fears the light!
Whether losing, whether winning
‘Trust in God and do the right’
Some will hate thee, some will love thee
Cease from man, and look above thee
‘Trust in God and do the right’

Simple rule and safest guiding
Inward peace and inward might,
Star upon our path abiding -
‘Trust in God and do the right’
Courage brother! do not stumble
Though thy path be dark as night;
There’s a star to guide the humble:
‘Trust in God and do the right’
Intercession

Rising To The Challenge

**Lord help us rise to your challenge**

*To work your will*

Father this world is so far from perfect
And you call it to be a better place - a place more like Heaven
There is brokenness that needs healed
There is injustice that needs righted
There is want that needs addressed
There is falsehood that needs challenged
We bring our prayers for the needs of the world
And we offer ourselves to be part of your answer

**Lord help us rise to your challenge**

We bring before you, Lord, broken hearts
Hearts broken by grief and loss
Hearts broken by unkindness and anger
We bring before you broken bodies
Bodies broken by injury or illness
Bodies broken by misuse or age
We bring before you broken minds and souls
Broken by stress, by overwork or unemployment
Broken by temptation and guilt
We ask for healing for brokenness
And we know what difference a smile or a word can make

**Lord help us rise to your challenge**

We bring before you, Lord, the victims of injustice
Victims of power and greed
Women traded and trafficked for the use of their bodies
People enslaved and exploited in their weakness
Victims of intolerance and hatred
Those imprisoned for their beliefs
Those despised for their race or for their lifestyle
We ask for justice in an unjust world
And we know that a voice raised with commitment makes a difference

**Lord help us rise to your challenge**

We bring before you Lord those in want
Men and women the world so often forgets
Huddled under blankets under bridges
Sleeping rough in the park
Going hungry while so many are overweight
Shaking their cups in doorways while the world hurries past
We ask that for food for the hungry and shelter for the homeless
And we know that the choices we make make a difference

**Lord help us rise to your challenge**

We bring before you, Lord, the falsehoods of the world
The falsehood that there is only so much love in the world
And that “charity begins at home” and ends there
The falsehood that “Might is right”
And that there will always be victims of the way the world works
The falsehood that inequality is just part of the way things are
That poverty and want are just part of life
We are your Church, touched by your Word and by your Holy Spirit

**Lord help us rise to your challenge**
Offering

Wonderfully Made

Lord we are fearfully and wonderfully made
You have given us thought and insight
You have given us language and reason
You have given us compassion and will
Lord we thank you
You have given us spiritual insights
You have given us ideas like truth and justice
You have given us purpose
Lord we thank you
You have given us your Son
Born as one of us
Teaching and guiding us
Dying along with us
Rising as a promise for us
Lord we thank you
For these things and much more we thank you
And we bring these offerings in thanksgiving
We ask you to bless them and bless them
To rededicate them and to redeicate us
To your work in the world
To the building up of your church
To the bringing in of your kingdom
Father, hear the prayer we offer:
not for ease that prayer shall be,
but for strength that we may ever
live our lives courageously.

Not for ever in green pastures
do we ask our way to be;
but the steep and rugged pathway
may we tread rejoicingly.

Not for ever by still waters
would we idly rest and stay;
but would smite the living fountains
from the rocks along our way.

Be our strength in hours of weakness,
in our wanderings be our guide;
through endeavour, failure, danger,
Father, be thou at our side.
But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment (Matthew 5:22)

At the beginning of each school year I’m supposed to sit down with each of my pupils and agree their targets for the year. I’m armed with their previous exam results, if they have any, predictors and statistics, school policy guidelines and the like and I have to set them targets for their achievement during the year. I am not allowed to target them to fail - even if the statistics and the predictors and the data all suggest that that is the most likely outcome. Nor am I supposed to set their targets unachievably high in case they get demoralised along the way as they fall short of that target in assessments. Targets are meant to be both aspirational and achievable. Sometimes that’s hard to do.

Clearly Jesus hadn’t read the policy documents before he began the Sermon On The Mount. “You’ve heard it said,” he begins, “Don’t commit murder”. That’s OK - most of us can hit that target. We can imagine ourselves ticking that box and thinking, “Tempting though it might be sometimes.” But then in comes Jesus with a real whammy - that’s too low a target. You’re not even supposed to be angry with your brother or your sister. That’s rather setting the bar somewhat higher - impossibly high some would say. Because the truth is we’ve all had those times when we’ve bitten our lips and smiled sweetly at someone but inside we’ve been seething. There are times when we’ve muttered silently to ourselves, “See if he does that one more time I’m doing to wipe that self-satisfied smile off his face”. We probably wouldn’t do that, of course, but in the silence of our thoughts we allow anger to fester.

You’ve heard it said, begins Jesus, “Do not commit adultery. That’s OK - most of can hit that target, whatever the soap operas would indicate. We can imagine ourselves ticking that box and thinking, “Tempting thought might be sometimes”. But then in comes Jesus with a real whammy - that’s too low a target. Even if you gaze lustfully on another woman - and I assume here, ladies, that this is an equal opportunities piece of teaching - you’ve committed adultery in your heart.
That’s setting the bar pretty high. Because the truth is that there are times for most of us when we find another person very attractive and we allow them to occupy our thoughts rather more than perhaps they should; when, perhaps, we find ourselves thinking, “You know, if I wasn’t married…”. We probably wouldn’t act on these impulses but in the silence of our thoughts we allow desire to fester.

And there’s the thing. “In the silence of our thought”. What if they weren’t silent? Midway through our reading we get to that uncomfortable point where he speaks about tearing out eyes and cutting off hands and this becomes one of the harder bits of Jesus’s teachings to understand. What I think the point is is that sins of the mind - of thought - make us as incomplete as the loss of a hand or an eye. The other thing is that the absence of an eye or a hand would be something visible - something that everyone could see and know that you had been indulging in something wrong. Our thoughts are, though are silent are invisible.

Or rather, they aren’t. God hears them. He hears all the angry rage inside our heads. He sees the images we have of the people around us we find attractive and the images that go along with that. These things we cannot hide from God. When it comes to the test, God knows all our works - including the ones we think we’re keeping hidden.

So what?, we imagine ourselves saying to God. If our thoughts are hidden inside our heads, how can they cause any harm? There’s an old saying - “The thought is father to the deed”. However much we imagine that our thoughts are invisible, they have a way of seeping out and becoming visible in the way we speak and the things we do. If we have allowed anger toward somebody else to fester then that becomes visible in the way we avoid them, or in the curt way we reply to them. There may even come a point when it all bursts out and we call them a fool - or perhaps even worse - and suddenly our sins of thought have become sins of word, or even deed if we really lose it. Similarly If we have allowed desire for another person to fester then it becomes visible in the way we stand when we are with them, in the little things we say and do when we are around them. There may even come a point where it all bursts out and we find ourselves saying and doing things we are definitely going to regret.

More to the point, though, if Jesus’s target setting in this passage seems a little
ambitious, we have to see that as a challenge. As a challenge in a particular context. He sets the bar high with very good reason and the bar is nothing less than perfection.

Hold on, though. Perfection? Now that’s an assessment none of us is going to pass. At least not without a great deal of help. And there’s the first point about context. The God who sees all our hidden thoughts and our secret desires - he also loves us in spite of all of that and he’s there for us whenever we need him. One of the things I keep telling kids at school is, look - if you’re struggling with something and you need help, come and see me. It’s the same with God. If we’re finding it hard to jump that bar that Christ set so high, then we can rely on him to help us - and he’s not just available at break and lunchtimes, but all day, everyday.

And if, sometimes we fail the tests that life throws at us - and let’s face it we don’t generally deal with them perfectly - then that’s not the end of it. It’s not like an exam where, if you fail on the day that’s you. Thanks to the Cross we always get another chance to try to live up to the standard God has set for us. Every time we fail to clear that bar that Jesus sets so high in this passage, the forgiveness Christ got for us means that we can leave that failure behind and try again.

And finally, there’s timescale. When I sit down with kids at the start of a year I’m setting their targets for that year. The reason Jesus sets the bar so high in this passage is that it is meant to be a challenge for the whole of our lives. Every day of our lives we fail to jump the bar but we will still have tomorrow - and maybe tomorrow we can get closer than we did today. And maybe the day after we will get closer still. And even when we run out of tomorrows the love of God will bring us home to him in eternity.

This part of the Sermon On The Mount is aspirational target. It’s a challenge to be all that we can be - to be children of God; made in the image of God. Think on that phrase. Savour it. Rejoice in it. That is the challenge God throws down in these words of Christ. The challenge to fulfil our full potential as God’s own children, made in his perfect image. Maybe we will never achieve it in this lifetime. Maybe we could spend our lives reaching for something that will tantalisingly be always out of reach. But maybe that is what goals are for.
Lord help us rise to your challenge and be all that we can be - loving our neighbours as we love ourselves and allowing your Holy spirit to guide our thoughts, our words and our deeds
LOVE Divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heaven, to earth come down,
Fix in us thy humble dwelling,
All thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesus, thou art all compassion,
Pure, unbounded love thou art;
Visit us with thy salvation,
Enter every trembling heart.

Come, almighty to deliver
Let us all thy life receive;
Suddenly return, and never,
Never more thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
Serve thee as thy hosts above,
Pray, and praise thee, without ceasing,
Glory in thy perfect love.

Finish then thy new creation:
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see thy great salvation,
Perfectly restored in thee,
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.
Benediction  Growing Children

Go now to grow as children of God
As you grow in faith, walk in faith
As you grow in hope, walk in hope
As you live in love, walk in love
Share faith and hope and love with everyone you meet
And now may the breath of God the Father be ever at your backs
May the teachings of his son, our Lord Jesus Christ, be ever in your minds
And may the presence and comfort of the Holy Spirit be ever in your hearts.