



St Marylebone  
Parish Church

**8.30am BCP Holy Communion**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity**

In the middle of today's gospel reading are these words: *'with the same measure that ye mete withal, it shall be measured to you again'* - or as a modern translation puts it, *'the measure you give will be the measure you get back'* (N/RSV). On a good day, when we've managed to be kind to the kid at school who hasn't got any friends, or to bite our tongue when someone at work gets under our skin, that's an encouraging thought. On the days when we're all too aware of the wrong we've done, the things we wish we hadn't said and our failure to be the best we can, it might sound a bit more worrying.

Today's gospel passage comes from what's sometimes called the Sermon on the Plain (6:17-49), just after Jesus has chosen the twelve apostles (vv. 12-16). In it, Luke shows Jesus teaching his followers about the kind of community he expected them to form. Jesus' vision is unsettling and uncompromising – the poor and hungry are blessed but woe to the happy and popular (vv. 20-26)! Not only that, but his disciples are to love their enemies and give more than they're asked for to everyone who makes demands of them (vv. 27-30). The overriding rule is that his disciples should do to others what they want others to do to them (v31) – the so called 'golden rule', versions of which are found in most of the world religions and which has been advocated as a basis for practical morality from Socrates onwards.

In our reading we hear this worked out both negatively and positively. By not judging or condemning others, we avoid judgement and condemnation. By forgiving others and giving generously to them, we ourselves receive forgiveness and generosity. There's a danger here though, which is that this ethic of reciprocity degenerates into a quagmire of legalism, where we always react to others with one eye to what's in it

for us. You might say that's an inevitable challenge for any ethic formulated around individual human interests, or for a secular philosophy – but surely the Christian gospel has more to say to us than that?

Well, I think the clue is in the first verse of our gospel – a verse which most bibles print as the end of the previous section, but which those who compiled the BCP lectionary clearly thought was important to introduce our reading today. *'Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father is merciful'* (v. 36). Our attitude to others isn't supposed to arise out of careful calculations about how we want them to treat us, but out of a recognition of God's grace and mercy towards us. Thus 'treat others as you want them to treat you' is only one half of the story; the other, essential half is this: recognise how generously God has already treated you', giving us a 'good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over' (v 38. See Mt 18:21-35).

So for Christians, the golden rule isn't just about human relationships, it's about human beings modelling their relationships with each other on the generosity of our heavenly Father, whose abundant grace towards us is based on his own nature, not on what we've done (1 Tim 1:9). In the Sermon on the Plain, we glimpse a community formed through response to this generous grace, revealed in Jesus; a community living out the life and priorities of the kingdom which Jesus proclaimed.

So returning to where we started: when we feel encouraged that the measure we use will be used towards us, we're also challenged by the thought that that measure, that standard, is the full extent of God's love for us. Meanwhile, when it raises our anxiety to know that the measure we use for others will be used for us too, we can remember that we act in response to God's love, empowered by his Holy Spirit. As our collect reminds us, without God, nothing is strong and nothing is holy. Nevertheless, when God is our ruler and guide, the things of this world can become a stepping stone to the things eternal. *Amen.*