

Lent V

Enter ye in by the narrow gate (Matthew 7.13).

This is the last of three sermons which use the Sermon on the Mount as a connected discourse to expound some basics of the Christian life. It is not specific to Passiontide.

The Sermon on the Mount was first delivered to ordinary Jews, and so to those tempted to see religion as “law” and to evaluate others in terms of that law. But, for most of us most of the time, that is not necessary. It is a burden for the clergy, sometimes, to decide whether somebody, however apparently sinful, is trying to be faithful. It may even be necessary to exclude somebody from the Church because we reluctantly conclude they are not trying to be faithful. But generally, we should not fascinate ourselves with such questions. When they are unavoidable, our business is saving if possible, not judging. We are instructed that we will never make any spiritual progress by judging others - if we try, God may judge us (“that ye may not be judged” implies that warning).

We have already learnt that a basic requirement of the faith is appreciation of God's generosity towards us. The Lord comes back to that topic. If even “ye, being evil” (this is as much preacher's humour as a factual statement) as a matter of course are generous to your children, then obviously the Father, being good, will be generous to all of us his children, good or bad. And if so, we must follow him.

It will not be easy. We are offered a cramped gate, a narrow path; a route thereafter along which there are many “false prophets” to seduce us. They will be plausible; we do have to reject their teaching (which is not the same thing as “judging”, or delighting in condemning them) on the basis that their “fruits” are not those of the Sermon on the Mount. We are glad to notice that some who stayed in communion with Canterbury longer than we did have now, however late, realised where the wide road is leading. (Yet be careful not to make the narrow path even narrower than it is!)

This life is a time of testing. We are not to judge, but, no mistake, the Father will and indeed at all times does judge. There are only two ways - and “he that is not with me is against me”. We can build our lives upon that “Rock which was Christ” (I Cor. 10.4); if not, whatever we think we are doing, we will be found to have built on the shifting sands of human folly. The Lord, exercising the authority of the Father, declares the Father's terms. No others are available. “The multitude were astonished at his teaching” - this applies to the whole sermon and we must not let the familiarity of the words hide from us how astonishing that teaching is.

This sounds grim; but the Lord refuses to calculate the odds. He would not say if there were few to be saved - only this, that those who have heard must make their choice and live it out. But this is “good news” - hard it may be, but there is a way to God open. The teaching of the two ways can easily lead to despair (a feeling that in practice only the way to destruction is open), but that is not the Lord's message. And nothing is said about those who have not heard and indeed cannot hear.

“The test of all spiritual fabrics is their capacity to stand the strain of wild and rough experiences” (Bishop Gore again). We do not live in an “age of faith” in which we are protected by the assumptions we share with many around us. “We know” (and how much more we than even Bishop Gore could imagine!) “that temptation is both thorough and searching, and that our moral and religious principles will in different ways be tested to the uttermost. To stand the test and to carry our moral being through it all to victory - that is the one thing that matters; and to make this possible there is one sovereign expedient - that is thorough and whole-hearted conversion of our will, our intellect, our affection, to Christ and His word.”