

SERMON – 1/9/24 **'Sacrificial Generosity'**

Introduction

We began reading the Book of Joshua last Sunday morning and we saw how Joshua had succeeded Moses as leader of the people of Israel and the time had finally come for the people to enter the Promised Land. In doing so they were to stand firm on the promises of God and to be guided by the Word of God in everything they did.

Our reading this morning follows on from an episode you can read about in Numbers 32 where the tribes of Reuben and Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh asked Moses if they could just stay where they were in the land to the East of the Jordan (which they were very happy with) and Moses said that they *could* do that but only if they crossed over into the Promised Land itself with the other tribes to assist them in the conquest before returning to the east once the task was completed.

So let's hear God's Word

Readings: Joshua 1:10-18 and Philippians 2:1-11

Text: [To the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh, Joshua said:] "All your fighting men, ready for battle, must cross over ahead of your fellow Israelites. You are to help them until the LORD gives them rest, as he has done for you, and until they too have taken possession of the land that the LORD your God is giving them. After that, you may go back and occupy your own land, which Moses the servant of the LORD gave you east of the Jordan towards the sunrise.'" (Joshua 1:14-15)

Sermon

It is sometimes pointed out that there are similarities between the ethical teachings of the world's religions and in fact some of these are also to be found amongst the principles of secular humanists. Versions of what is known as the 'Golden Rule' – the 'do unto others' principle' – are to be found in most religions and philosophies. 'Love your neighbour as you love yourself' we read in the Law of Moses, one half of the summary of the Law

alongside Love for God. In the Hindu Mahabharata it says: "This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you ." Confucius also said: "Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself." Buddha said, "Treat not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful." Mohammed said, "As you would have people do to you, do to them; and what you dislike to be done to you, don't do to them." The Bah'ai faith teaches its followers: "Lay not on any soul a load that you would not wish to be laid upon you, and desire not for anyone the things you would not desire for yourself." And Zoroastrians teach: "Do not do unto others whatever is injurious to yourself." The African Yoruba religion has a colourful proverb that says, "One who is going to take a pointed stick to pinch a baby bird should first try it on himself to feel how it hurts."

The humanist chaplain of Harvard University rather smugly points out that none of these versions of the Golden Rule require there to be a God. And of course he is right but then this is an ethical statement not a theological one, but it's also true to say that most of the world's people find that it is their desire to serve God that is the chief motivation for their ethical behaviour.

What brings a slightly different nuance to any discussion of the Golden Rule is that most versions of it are couched in negative terms – *don't* do what you don't want others to do to you – whereas Jesus' version of it in the Sermon on the Mount is positive and proactive - "In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you." (Matthew 7:12)

I say that by way of introduction to this morning's sermon because it seems to me that it illustrates the principle of what I am calling 'Sacrificial Generosity' that is exemplified both in our earlier reading from Joshua chapter 1 and also from the famous verses we read from Paul's letter to the Philippians, one that should be the motivation not only for our ethical behaviour as Christians but for all that we are.

Put yourself in the position of the people of Israel, poised after a generation of fruitless wandering in the wilderness to enter finally into the Promised Land that they knew from eye-witness reports to be a land flowing with milk and honey, unimaginably fertile and fruitful especially in comparison with the scrubland in which they

had been eking out an existence for so long. In fact even the land in which they were currently encamped on the east side of the Jordan was so much better than anything they had experienced in Sinai that the tribes of Reuben and Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh had decided that they would rather just settle there than go on and face the undoubted dangers that lay ahead of the people in the conquest of the Promised Land.

The danger was that, just as a generation previously, the voices of those unwilling to trust the Lord would again persuade the whole people to make do with what they had rather than press on to take hold of what God had promised them as their future inheritance, and Moses had known that, so in agreeing to allow some to settle east of the Jordan he exhorted them to exercise a sacrificial generosity in supporting the other tribes and he secured from them the following promise, recorded in Numbers 32: "We will not return to our homes until each of the Israelites has received their inheritance. We will not receive any inheritance with them on the other side of the Jordan, because our inheritance has come to us on the east side of the Jordan."

And, motivated by the Golden Rule, and true to their word, we find them in our reading this morning reaffirming to Joshua the promise that they had made to Moses: "Whatever you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go." (Josh.1:16)

Which brings me to the exhortation that I think we need to be given as Christians in our time to fulfil the Golden Rule not just in its more negative forms, that is to say refraining from acting towards other people in ways that we wouldn't like them to act towards us, and not even just in its more positive form as Jesus *said* - 'Do to others what you would have them do to you' - but as Christ *did* and as the apostle Paul exhorted the church in Philippi to be motivated by the example Christ gave: "being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others." (Phil.2:2-4)

I don't despise the Golden Rule – very far from it. What an altogether different landscape there would be in Israel and on the West Bank and in Gaza today if each side were not doing to the other what they didn't want their enemies to do to them. We should rejoice that there is a willingness to ceasefire at least in certain zones across Gaza for the next three days to allow the vaccination of children against polio. But surely that must just be the start, and what a radical transformation there would be in the whole situation if both sides were willing to consider the other better than themselves and to look to the interests of the other rather than themselves.

But before we point the finger at others, let's take time to consider what it means for each one of us to live Christlike lives of sacrificial generosity. In the revolutionary words that Paul quotes from what was probably some kind of hymn or statement of faith in the early Church, our attitude or mindset should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. He is God Most High and yet He was willing to sacrifice His right to be enthroned on high in majesty by emptying Himself completely and becoming one with us as a human being. Even as a human being He chose to live as the lowest of the low and though, as He said to Peter on the night of His arrest He could have called on legions of angels to rescue Him from those who came to arrest Him, He willingly gave Himself up and sacrificed Himself to death, the most ignominious death the world has ever invented – crucifixion.

But it was through that sacrificial generosity that He won the eternal victory over death and sin and all the power of evil and will be acknowledged for who He truly is as every knee bows and every tongue confesses Him as Lord, the name that is above every name.

There is our motivation, my friends. And there is the answer that the world is longing for, a much better way than anything this world can ever accomplish, better even than the Golden Rule in whatever form or language it may be uttered, although if you are looking for an ethical framework, the Golden Rule would be a very good place to start.

Don't do to others what you don't want them to do to you. Better than that do actively for others what you would like them to do for you. But better still, be willing to give yourself up for the sake of others, like the tribes of Reuben and Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh were willing to do for their Israelite brothers and sisters. And best of all, if you learn anything at all from Christ, value others above yourself, for in Christ, God has been generous to us and we are called to be generous to others, sacrificially generous, without any thought of reward.