

A Sermon Preached at Wicken Parish Church on the Fourth Sunday Before Lent 2017. Isaiah 58: 1-12; Psalm 112; Matthew 5: 13-20

I don't have many heroes. One of the heroes I do have died last week. He died peacefully at home at the age of 85, and that was Sir Ken Morrison - the man behind Morrison's supermarkets. You probably heard about his death on the news. I'm conscious I may be rather more familiar with Morrison's than you are: there are many more branches in the North than in the South and East, but even round here I've spotted one or two.

So why, you might be wondering, other than that he was a fellow Northerner, why should Sir Ken Morrison be one of my heroes?

Sir Ken came from humble beginnings. His life in retail began when he was 9, when he started helping his father with on his stall on Bradford market. 76 years later, he died as one of Yorkshire's richest men.

In 2004, Morrison's bought up Safeway, and so became one of the UK's 'Big 3' supermarkets. Up there with Tesco and Sainsbury's. Quite some progress from a stall on Bradford market.

But it's not just Sir Ken Morrison's achievements I admire, it's also his attitude. This is what someone said about him when he died: 'he had a gentle humour and kindness about him. He could talk with genuine interest to anyone'. When he visited his supermarkets, Sir Ken was famous for not creaming off the managers and taking them off to an office. Instead, he'd roll up his sleeves and help stack the shelves; he'd have a word with the assistants on the tills: he took the trouble to find out what was really going on, and he mixed with his staff at the coal-face. When a journalist asked him what his wife had to say when she heard he was launching a surprise bid for Safeway, Sir Ken Morrison said this: 'Strangely enough I didn't tell my wife at the beginning. What did she say when I did tell her? She said nothing. She said your tea's ready'. Despite his rise to glory, Sir Ken Morrison remained humble man.

But what's the relevance of that this morning? What's it got to do with the readings we've just heard?

Today's Gospel reading was an extract from what's known as the Sermon on the Mount - the text that constitutes Chapters 5 to 7 in Matthew's Gospel. Matthew doesn't call them the Sermon on the Mount, but that's how the critics refer to it. It always strikes me that calling these passages the Sermon on the Mount might risk creating the wrong impression - it makes what's happening sound a Billy Graham rally - as though Jesus is speaking to crowds and crowds of people. What Jesus is actually doing, Matthew says, is 'teaching his disciples'. At the start of Chapter 5, so just before passage we've heard today, Jesus sees the crowds, goes up the mountain and sits down. And once he's sat down he teaches his disciples. That's what Matthew writes. We're not told whether the crowds are there or not. The implication, I'd say, is that they aren't. The text suggests Jesus leaves the crowds behind - that he's teaching his disciples alone.

And who are the disciples?

We're only at the start of Matthew's Gospel. The only disciples we've been told about so far are four fishermen: Simon called Peter, Andrew, James and John. The men Jesus calls to follow him at the end of the preceding chapter. We might also infer that there are other disciples - not the rest of the twelve apostles, because Jesus hasn't called them yet, but rather people who fit the description of the people Jesus talks about in the Beatitudes - the 'Blessed are theys' and 'Blessed are yous' that come just before today's Gospel reading. To these people - to these humble people - the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek and those who hunger for righteousness; to the merciful, the pure in heart, the peace-makers and the 'Blessed are you - your reward will be great in heaven' - Jesus says and Jesus promises extraordinary things.

'You are the salt of the earth' of the earth, he says to them today, 'you are the light of the world'. Now I've a friend who, when I told him I was preaching today and what the Gospel reading was told me he'd never understood that 'salt of the earth' reference - salt, he pointed out, is no good for the earth. Too

much salt will poison the soil. I didn't have an answer for that - if any of you have ideas, please let me know. What I have read about salt is that the primary use for salt in Jesus' day was as a preservative. Salt was used to stop meat going rotten. We might read that as a call to us Christians to do what we can to maintain the cause of justice and right - not only in society, but also in our personal lives. 'Blessed are the pure in heart' is one of the beatitudes. To the Jewish mind, salt is also a symbol for wisdom - imagine that - to four fishermen, and to whoever else was gathered to hear his teaching, to the humble people, to the nobodies, Jesus says 'You are the wise ones', you are the ones who are wise in God's eyes - you are the salt of the earth.

And because the disciples have this charge on their lives, the way they live will have an effect. A common feeling, it seems to me, of people who are poor is that their voices are rarely heard - what they do doesn't matter, what they say has no effect. But Jesus says no - you can change things. You can make a difference. Live your lives God's way, Jesus says, and teach other people who I am, and you will have your reward - 'Whoever does my commandments and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven'. The nobodies will become somebodies. The humble will be raised up.

And not only that - the humble, the nobodies are called to righteousness. They are called to live lives that manifest righteousness. Our Psalm and first reading this morning were shot with references to righteousness - righteousness which is a quality of God. That's what Jesus calls us to 'unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven'. Jesus' disciples - these ordinary men and women - are called to stand out from the crowd. They are called to be like God.

And that, it seems to me, is a message of hope. It's a message that finds an echo in the story of the life of Sir Ken Morrison. I'm not saying Morrison was a saint - I've no idea what his religious beliefs were - but his life is testimony to the Gospel message that great things can grow from humble beginnings. That boy on the market stall had potential, and by the grace of God, surely, that potential was unlocked. Potential found its fulfilment. Morrison's became a household name.

So what might that say to us as individuals, and to us as part of the Christian community here in Wicken?

There's a card I like very much in the gift shop at Bishop Woodford House. The caption on it reads 'If you think you're too small to make a difference, you've never been to bed with a mosquito'.

We've all got different ways of thinking of ourselves as small - we might be small literally, or there might be things about us that make us feel small: maybe we feel weak, maybe we're old, maybe we're not as fit as we used to be. Maybe our faith is small. Maybe it's non-existent. Maybe we're riddled by doubt. In this congregation we're small numerically - there are 14 of us here this morning. We might think we're too small to achieve much at all.

But Jesus in the Gospel won't have any of that. His call to us today is just the same as it was to those first disciples - 'You are the salt of the earth', 'You are the light of the world'. Go and live your lives. Go and live lives of righteousness. Go and make a difference. Go and tell the world about me - go and spread my good news. 'Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven'.

'If you think you're too small to make a difference, you've never been to bed with a mosquito. Let's take that to heart, for ourselves and for the church in this place. Let's trust in God's power, and let's pray to him. Let's ask for the grace to see ourselves and see others as God sees us: see ourselves as people with potential, whatever our outward appearances - see ourselves for what we are - see ourselves Jesus' disciples - those who are called to be salt and light; those called to make Christ known the world.

And as for Sir Ken Morrison, may he rest in peace and rise in glory. Amen.
