

Hayfield only – sermon on our STATEMENT OF PURPOSE 2014

H.C. 23.11.14

DEUT 6: 1-12
LUKE 10:25-37

RUBBING OUT THE BOUNDARIES

Why are we here? Why do quite a number of us gather together as people who feel we belong to St Matthew's church? A number of years ago the Church Council worked to put together what we called a 'Statement of Purpose' to try to answer that question. It was a bit long-winded to be honest so we've had another go this year. [I hope you've read about it in the parish magazine]

We want it to be something that's in our minds in whatever we do. So we've got a few posters about the place on our noticeboards and we want it to be known around our village too – so if you've any ideas as to how we can keep on reminding ourselves what we're here for and telling others, please tell me or one of the PCC. If we lose sight of our purpose, we can waste a lot of time and energy getting bogged down with things that don't matter quite so much and that can lead to great discouragement. We need to be clear. I want you to know what those on our leadership group have said about what we think we stand for. This sermon will be going in the next mag, and on the website and there are a few paper copies at the back – please do read again.

This is what we have said:

we at St Matthew's are a fellowship of Christians committed to placing God at the centre of our lives. We exist to follow Christ's example and to share his message and love with the local and wider community.

- We're a fellowship of people following Christ – we don't do this alone but together (like it or not!!)
- We want God to be at the centre – not on the outside
- We want to share his message **and** share his love – words alone aren't enough
- We want to do that with our local **and** wider community – not just our friends, not even just our own village

I want us to think about those things again in the light of our Bible readings today but since we say in our statement that we want to have God in the centre of our lives, I want to start by thinking a bit about boundaries and centres.

Boundaries mark things out so we know the edges and the area in which it's usually good to be. You play inside the lines on a football pitch; a fence or a wall marks a

boundary of property so you know which bit belongs to you and which bit to your neighbour.

We also keep boundaries for safety's sake: stay behind the line on the station platform; don't take more than the recommended dose of medicine.

There those moral boundaries too, perhaps harder to define in some cases in our own society where anything goes: sexual boundaries, what you do with money, whether it's alright to tell a lie, what you watch on TV. Some of the lines are drawn for us – like a speed limit – and some we have to work out for ourselves according to conscience.

Mostly we think it's good to keep away from the edges. Mostly we go with the mainstream, even if sometimes that seems dull and predictable.

But sometimes there are more tricky boundaries to manage when it comes to people. Some people seem to live 'on the edge' – the ones with no home, or the unemployed or the people who feel suicidal, the ones who are kept as slaves or with hardly any food to live on (not only overseas but in the UK as well) and those who have rejected the 'normal' way of life and have such a different way of being that they are pushed out.

Some boundaries are good but maybe there are some that should never have been put there at all.

'An expert in the Law stood up to test Jesus' (Luke 10:25) He wanted to test Jesus but he did also want to do the right things and get the very best out of life. 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' Well, he has a good mind so Jesus asks him to work it out for himself: 'what is written in the Law? How do you read it?' (v.26) and there's a very clear answer, that's drawn from the words of Moses to the new community of Israel hundreds of years ago as they travelled to their promised land – “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind” and “love your neighbour as yourself”

That is the right answer, the correct answer, Jesus tells him. If you want a rule to live by, that's it. Those people way back in time needed to know how to live with each other and it started with learning to see the immense love and power of God who had set them free from being slaves. If they could only grasp what that meant, they might overcome their dislikes and jealousies and prejudices and annoyances with one another.

Lots of us think we know the right way to live. Lots of us think we live 'good' lives. But this expert in the Law isn't satisfied. He wants to *'justify himself'* (v.29) He

wants to be able to prove how good he is. He wants to be able to *feel right* and reasonable. He wants to account for his decisions and his actions so God and others will see how fair and good he is. If you've never done this, please feel free to doze off at this point! Most of us will not like thinking or being told we got it wrong, or we caused hurt or we ignored someone we should have helped or we misunderstood them. Most of us will want to explain that *we did this because we thought that, which led to such a thing and surely it's reasonable....especially because that person said this which made me think that so really it's their own fault...*

That expert wanted to know who the people were that he should be a neighbour to. A list would really help. Instead he gets the story of the good Samaritan who helps an injured man when religious God-fearers do not.

The expert in the Law – like some of us, probably- had his boundaries. To protect ourselves we create boundaries, especially with people. They help us know who is in and who is out. So we have boundaries to protect ourselves when to do something could bring physical or emotional or mental strain; we protect our own personal time schedule or agenda of how we want to spend our days; we protect ourselves from being tarnished by association with people who aren't quite nice; we protect our reputation '*what will people think about me?*'

The Samaritan in Jesus' story smashes the stereotypes of who would be expected to help but more than that, he rubs out the boundaries. Think of what he risks: on a notorious road for bandits, the bandits might return and rob or hurt him; he would end up with blood on his clothing; he risked what other Samaritans would think if they saw him, stained and dirty, and knew he'd been tending a Jew; he risked his reputation – would they want to associate with him afterwards; he risked his schedule – he might be late, it wasn't what he'd planned; he gave his money and had less for himself; he was spending more time on a stranger than on the people he may have been on the way to meet.

He risked a lot. He didn't have boundaries. So the expert in the Law has to see this is the man who showed mercy and he did it by having God in the centre of his life and mercy and grace in the centre. That's all you need to know.

God, too, rubbed out boundaries to show mercy. There are rules for right living, yes. But there are no boundaries when people need help, love, grace to start again, forgiveness, new hope. When those people of Israel had finally reached a promised land, Moses said they weren't to relax and forget what it took to get them there and think it was all about their own efforts. No, don't forget it was God who has set you free and given hope. So love the Lord your God with all you've got and love your neighbours as well. And learn the commands of God and the way to live. Teach it to

your children, talk about it, work out how to live it, he said.

The religious people *thought* they had God in the centre but it was only when they rubbed out the boundaries and went to the edges with Jesus that they could really find where God was and wanted them to be.

Coming back to our statement of purpose... the fact is that we are meant to be people who find the way *together* to put God at the centre and share his message and love. To have God central we **must** keep coming back to him in prayer and worship. We must keep on reading the Bible to find out who he is, coming to him each day (whatever other demands there are) to offer ourselves to him, and coming to him together to praise to pray to get to know each other. If it's all about justifying our own actions we'll always be reasonable, sometimes be right but often be without mercy. I, for one, don't want to be that kind of a person.

To have God in the centre then means we can 'think outside the box'. The we can go to the very edges and beyond with people who need not just words that sound beautiful in this building but actions that say something louder because they show God's love where it's needed most.

This is what our church leaders have proposed should be in our minds and hearts as much as possible at St Matthew's and I commend it to you all to learn, to talk about, to work at, just as the Israelites did. (I'd love it if I heard everyone discussing what this means over their coffee this morning!)

We at St Matthew's are a fellowship of Christians committed to placing God at the centre of our lives. We exist to follow Christ's example and to share his message and love with the local and wider community.

May God help us to live this out not just in words that get forgotten but actions that draw people to him.

Hilary Edgerton-22.11.14