

10. GOSPEL VALUES

We speak a lot about “gospel values” in Catholic schools. Gospel values are those attitudes, beliefs, understandings, practices, habits, lifestyle choices, concerns, insights, qualities, outlooks and standards that are the way of life for followers of Jesus who have set their hearts first on the kingdom of God and on God’s righteousness (Matthew 6:33)

Gospel values – a lot more demanding than you think!

Gospel values proceed from our daily prayer, “Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God

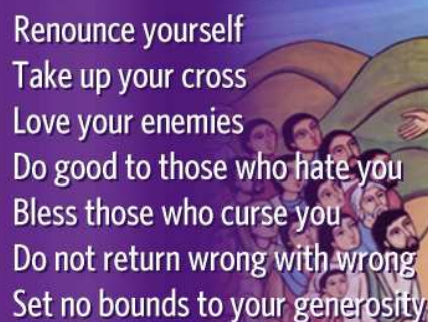
The culture of the times often negates Gospel values and stands in opposition to the kingdom of God. Indeed, Jesus remarked, “How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mark 10:25). He said this after observing how difficult some find it to forsake their worldly security and follow him. Many people found Jesus’ sayings too hard; they “turned back to their former way of life and no longer went about with him” (John 6:66). “Wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to ruin, and many are those who take it,” Jesus said, “but the gate to life is narrow and the path that leads to it is steep and hard, and there are few people who find it” (Matthew 7:13-14).

A hidden mystery

It is hard to accept Jesus’ sayings because they sometimes sound unrealistic or even absurd. Those who are used to the ways of the world may think Jesus was trying to be clever or provocative or “otherwise”. The ways of the kingdom would not be immediately self-evident to them. Jesus compared the kingdom to a treasure that is buried in a field and has to be uncovered (Matthew 13:44), or a pearl of great price on the ocean bed that has to be found (Matthew 13:45). Even his own disciples did not always understand what Jesus was on about: “Have you no perception? Are your minds closed? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?” (Mark 8:17-18). Jesus told a scribe who – unlike most of the chief priests, scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees – understood that love was the first of all the commandments: “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:28-34).

Seek first the kingdom of God

Once we open our minds and catch hold of the vision of God’s Kingdom and his divine plan “to gather everything together under Christ, everything in the heavens and everything on earth” (see Ephesians 1:3-14), we direct our lives towards making ourselves and society receptive to the Kingdom.



Renounce yourself
Take up your cross
Love your enemies
Do good to those who hate you
Bless those who curse you
Do not return wrong with wrong
Set no bounds to your generosity



THE PRIMACY OF LOVE FAITH THAT MOVES MOUNTAINS
DETACHMENT FROM MONEY AND POSSESSIONS SHARING
LITTLENES SERVICE SOLIDARITY TRANSFORMING INITIATIVES



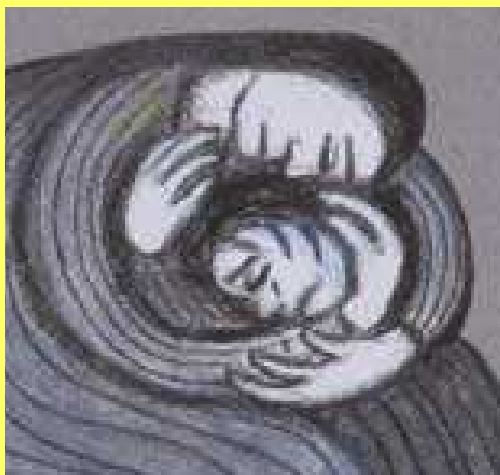
One of the scribes ... put a question to him, "Which is the first of all the commandments?"

Jesus replied, "This is the first: 'Listen, Israel, the Lord our God is the one Lord, and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You must love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

The scribe said to him, "Well spoken, Master; what you have said is true: that he is one and there is no other. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself, this is far more important than to offer holocausts and sacrifices to God."

Jesus, seeing how wisely he had spoken, said, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."
(Mark 12:28-34)

Understood from Jesus' viewpoint, love is not simply one virtue among others, not one principle among similar principles. It is really the basic criterion of all virtues, principles and norms of human behaviour. The commandment always exists for the sake of love and not love for the sake of the commandment.



Jesus' statement, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27), captures what happens when people forget the primacy of love. Jesus and his disciples got into trouble with the scribes and Pharisees for breaking the Sabbath law. They picked corn and Jesus healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath (Luke 6:1-11). The Jews told a man who had been sick for thirty-eight years that it was not lawful for him to carry his pallet on the Sabbath. This was after Jesus had cured the man at the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-16).

So loveless had the religion of the people become that a minor transgression of the Law blinded them to sharing the joy of a healed man. A legalistic attitude had taken hold amongst Jews in Jesus' time. The Law had become confused with justice, truth and morality.

People worried about the length of the tassels on their prayer shawls and the breadth of their phylacteries, but neglected "the weightier matters of the Law – justice, mercy and good faith." They "strained out gnats but swallowed camels" (Matthew 23:23, 24).

The Law had become the point of reference in deciding what to do. People approached the practical moral question, "What ought I to do?" by first answering the question, "What does the law require?"

Legalism is a sub-Christian mentality, and Jesus frequently warned against it. He rebutted the Pharisees: "I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to destroy it?" (Luke 6:9). He asked them, "Which of you shall have his son or his ox fallen into a well, and will not straightway pull him out on a Sabbath day?" (Luke 14:5).

Jesus quoted Hosea 6:6, "I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice," as justification for breaking the Sabbath.

Love cannot be reduced to a law. We cannot love just because we must. Obedience to God's will requires internal responses which cannot be controlled or checked by legal regulations and prescriptions. God demands people's hearts.



gospel values

FAITH THAT MOVES MOUNTAINS

"If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it would move; nothing would be impossible for you."

Matthew 17:20



"Everything is possible for anyone who has faith"

Mark 9:23

Jesus' followers cannot be fatalists, as fatalism is the opposite of faith. Fatalism says, *you can't change the world, you must be realistic, one person can't make a difference.* These are the statements of people who do not really believe in the power of God.

Faith is the conviction that God is good to people and that God can and will triumph over evil.

The miracles of Jesus' healing activity were the triumph of faith over fatalism. Lepers were cured (Luke 5:12-14; 17:14), the paralysed got up and walked (Luke 5:25; John 5:9), the sight of the blind was restored (Luke 18:42-43; John 9:7), the deaf began to hear and the dumb to speak (Mark 7:35), the dead were raised to life (Luke 7:15; 8:49-56; John 11:43).



Over and over, Jesus said to people, *your faith has made you well.* And so people looked to Jesus to increase their faith (Luke 17:5) or to help their unbelief (Mark 9:24).

Jesus was not able to do much in Nazareth because of the people's lack of faith (Mark 6:5-6).

To have mountain-moving faith and to awaken faith in others is a gospel value.



gospel values

DETACHMENT FROM MONEY AND POSSESSIONS

"Do not store up treasures for yourselves on earth, where moths and woodworms destroy them and thieves can break in and steal. But store up treasures for yourselves in heaven, where neither moths nor woodworms destroy them and thieves cannot break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

Matthew 6:19-21



"Do not worry about what you are to eat or how to clothe yourself. If God looks after the birds of the air and the wild flowers in the field, he will also look after you."

Matthew 6:25-34

Our lives are free of inordinate worry and anxiety about material needs.

Our faith is in God's loving regard for the world.

Anxiety disables faith.

We trust in the *providence of God.*

Our lives derive meaning and purpose from God and from seeking his kingdom, as distinguished from lives that are merely concerned with eking out a daily existence.



gospel values **SHARING**

"Give to everyone who asks you for something, and when someone takes what is yours, do not ask for it back." Luke 6:30

"... lend without any hope of return." Luke 6:35

We cannot have two masters: God and money. Matthew 6:24

Jesus called for extraordinary generosity and magnanimity. We must place no limits on our generosity.



Alas for you who are rich: you are having your consolation now.

Alas for you who have your fill now: you shall go hungry. Luke 6:24-25



Ruth gleaned ears of corn in the fields of Boaz when she returned with Naomi from the land of Moab. Boaz instructed his servants to give her free access to his fields (see Ruth 2).

The early Christian community owned everything in common. "They sold their goods and possessions and shared

out the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed ... they shared their food gladly and generously ... none of their members was ever in want ..." (see Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-35).

In the story of Ananias and Sapphira, we see what happens to those who would not share with the community, but kept back some for themselves (Acts 5:1-11).

The miracles of the loaves and fishes (Mark 6:30-44 and 8:1-10) show what happens when people share.

When the rich young man found Jesus' call to sell his possessions and give to the poor – "and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" – too challenging, Jesus remarked, "How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God ... It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:17-27). The young man relied too heavily on financial security, so God's power was not able to work in him.

When the people of Israel crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land, God shared out the land equally among the tribes and families (see Numbers 32, 34:1 – 35:8, Deuteronomy 3:12-20, Joshua 13-20).

Every seventh year was a Sabbath Year (Exodus 23:10-11, Leviticus 25:1-7). Debts were cancelled and slaves were set free (Deuteronomy 15:1-15). Poverty sometimes forced Israelites to sell themselves as slaves to more prosperous neighbours. In the Sabbath Year they were to be set free and their masters were to load their shoulders liberally with livestock, grain and wine (Deuteronomy 15:12-15). The freed slave would thereby have the means to make his own way.

Every fiftieth year was a Jubilee Year (Leviticus 25:8-19). All land was returned to its original owners without compensation. With his land returned, the poor person could make a fresh start at earning his living. It was the poor person's *right* to receive back what he had originally received from God, but had been whittled away from him by smarter, shrewder, craftier, greedier people over the years since the last Jubilee, or by natural adversities.

Those who owned productive property were obligated to leave some wheat, some olives or some grapes in the field for "the foreigner, the orphan and the widow" (Deuteronomy 24:19-22).

These were God's provisions for ensuring that not too wide a gap was created between rich and poor. The prophets railed against the people when they exploited the poor (see the book of Amos, for example. Amos saw terrible oppression of the poor: The rich "trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth" (2:17)).

It is from within this tradition that Jesus is coming from when he says to the rich young man: "Go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor ... and come follow me." Jesus is not saying he must become destitute and friendless. He invited him to join a community of sharing and love, where his security would not be based on individual property holdings, but on the loving care of new-found brothers and sisters.



gospel values

LITTLENESS



Unless we are willing to hold the same lowly place in society as children, we will never enter the kingdom of God

(see Matthew 18:1-4)

Children: a live parable of littleness

At the time of Jesus, children ranked very low on the social scale. They had no status in society at all. Since children were not yet knowledgeable of the Torah, they had no merit before God. The child was considered a person of no importance, meriting no attention or favours. Children did not count.

But for Jesus children are people too and they count as much as anyone else. That is why he was disturbed when his disciples chased the children away. Jesus took the children in his arms and blessed them. "It is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs," he said (Mark 10:14). In other words, it will be a kingdom of those who – like children – are insignificant and do not count and get chased away.

By promising the Kingdom to children, Jesus challenged contemporary thinking on merit, reward, and the entire patriarchal society by declaring that children's incapacity for earning the Kingdom was their greatest asset. Being "like a child" means one has nothing to give, nothing to show, in order to gain the Kingdom. It means being without any claim of deserving or earning it. Jesus does not have a naïvely romanticising attitude about the "innocence" of children. It is the absolute gratuitousness of the Kingdom that is stressed.

Adults are seen as being out of step with what it means to enter the Kingdom. We are asked to abandon false values such as status seeking, power and wealth. These values are barriers to entering the Kingdom. Instead of seeking status and prestige, the Kingdom requires that we humble ourselves and get rid of our self-importance measured in worldly values. We are asked to find our true vocation in obedient service to God. In doing so, we become one with Jesus. We become his disciples.



Jesus criticised the scribes and Pharisees for living for the prestige and admiration given to them by others. They liked to walk about in long robes and make a lengthy show of their prayers. "Everything they do is done to attract attention to themselves, like wearing broader phylacteries and longer tassels, like wanting to take the place of honour at banquets and the front seats in the synagogues, being greeted obsequiously in the market squares and having people call them Rabbi" (Matthew 23:5-7).

Jesus told his followers to *beware* of those who seek honour, position, status and prestige (Mark 12:38-40).

Why should we beware of such people?

Jesus was afraid that we would value people because they come first in class, or because they run the 100m faster than anyone else, or because they drive a big expensive car, or because they hold a high position, or because they are a celebrity ... and not simply because of their humanity, which is what Jesus valued people for.

Jesus was not impressed by a person's rank or status " (Mark 12:13-14).

Anyone concerned with their own importance, their status, prestige or greatness is out of tune with gospel values



St Jean-Baptiste-Marie Vianney, the Curé d'Ars

Jean-Baptiste Vianney (1786-1859) had not been exercising his priestly ministry for very long in the remote French village of Ars

when word began spreading of his extraordinary holiness and gifts as a confessor. Eventually, thousands – from young men and women in doubt as to their vocation, to sinners and persons in all sorts of

difficulties – were making the journey to Ars from all over the world to seek Vianney’s guidance. He spent up to eighteen hours a day in the confessional, a dark and poorly ventilated wooden box.

The Church tried to honour him by making him a Canon, but he was not interested in status and prestige and preferred to do good quietly. When the local bishop tried to put the canon’s *mozetta* over Vianney’s shoulders, Vianney struggled desperately to shake off the garment. He later sold it for fifty francs, and used the money for his orphanage. More than once, when people were making too much fuss of him, Vianney simply ran away.

Napoleon III bestowed on Vianney the Legion of Honour, the highest award in France. Vianney firmly refused to allow the cross to be pinned to his breast and gave it back to the priest who had been deputed to invest him with it.



The irreducible dignity of each human person

Mother Teresa valued people for their humanity and because they bear within them the image of God. She did not determine the worth of a person by how successful or productive they are.

Mother Teresa is a witness to the irreducible dignity of each human person.

Human dignity is totally unearned; it comes from being a child of God.

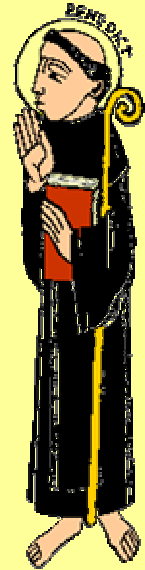
The gospel value is to treat all people the same.

See that you never despise any of these little ones
Matthew 18:10

Treating all the same

“Let all guests who arrive be received as Christ, because He will say: ‘I was a stranger and you welcomed me’ (Mt 25:35) ... when a guest is announced, let him be met by the Superior and the brethren with every mark of charity ... In the greeting let all humility be shown to the guests ... with the head bowed down or the whole body prostrate on the ground, let Christ be adored in them as He is also received”

(From *The Rule of St Benedict*, Chapter 53: *On the Reception of Guests*)



gospel values

SERVICE

Sometimes when people are placed in positions where they have power over others, this power “goes to their heads”.

They “like to make their authority felt”, as Jesus put it (Mark 10:42). They surround themselves with the trappings of power: special garments, insignia and titles. People have to stand when they enter a room. They are chauffeured in grand limousines and motorcades, build splendid palaces for themselves, and sit on grand thrones.

Kingdoms of this world are governed by the power of domination and force. The exercise of power in the kingdom of God will be very different. The power of God is the power of service and freedom.



Jesus’ washing of his disciples’ feet at the Last Supper demonstrated this service. *The son of man did not come to be served but to serve.*

James and John asked Jesus if, when he sits on his throne in his glorious kingdom, they could sit on his left and right. They were excited by the prospect of exercising power. The other ten were indignant. Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that among the pagans their rulers lord it over them, and their great men make their authority felt. This is not to happen among you. No, anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be first among you must be the slave of all. For the son of man himself did not come to be served but to serve” (Mark 10:35-45).

The power of the kingdom of God is not a power which has to be served, a power before which people must bow down and cringe. It is a power which is so unselfish that it will serve people even by dying for them.



gospel values

SOLIDARITY

Probably the most revolutionary thing that Jesus ever said was, "Love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44).

A narrow group solidarity is no virtue. Jesus called for an experience of solidarity with all humankind. Solidarity is extended even to those who hate you, persecute you or treat you badly.

Solidarity means breaking through barriers of race, nationality, class, language and religious affiliation.

Our all-inclusive solidarity with the human race: if we put our loyalty to our ethnic group, nation, language, culture, social class, religious denomination or political party before our loyalty to the human race, we are out of tune with gospel values.

Jesus went out of his way to associate with outcasts to whom solidarity was not extended (Luke 15:2). He accepted the invitation of Pharisees to meals at their homes. He entertained tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners, so much so that he got the reputation of being a glutton and a drunkard (Matthew 11:19).

Jesus saw "us and them" thinking, where some people are insiders and others are outsiders, as an obstacle to the coming of the kingdom of God. Such thinking had to be got rid of.

In answer to the question *Who is my neighbour?* Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). His answer to Jews, to whom Samaritans were enemies (they would not drink from the same cup as a Samaritan), was that the Samaritans were their neighbours.

Jesus is the God who humbled himself and became human, taking the form of a slave (Philippians 2:6-8) to stand in solidarity with people whose dignity is trampled upon and who shared in the struggles of oppressed peoples as a refugee, a homeless person, and a fugitive handed over to his enemies to be nailed to a cross and crucified, and ultimately as our saviour through his resurrection and ascension.



gospel values

TRANSFORMING INITIATIVES

Going beyond mere eye-for-an-eye justice

"You have heard the commandment, 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.' But what I say to you is: do not strike back at evil in kind. When a person strikes you on the right cheek, turn and offer him the other. If anyone wants to go to law over your shirt, hand him your coat as well. Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go with him two miles"

Matthew 5:38-42



Part of the Law of Moses that people lived by in Jesus' time was: "A life for a life ... anyone who inflicts an injury on his neighbour shall receive the same in return. Limb for limb, eye for eye, tooth for tooth" (Leviticus 24:19-20).

Gandhi remarked that eye-for-an-eye justice "makes the whole world blind".

If we live by gospel values, we go beyond mere eye-for-an-eye justice. We have to go beyond the ordinary and do extraordinary things. In situations of conflict, we have to find creative, transformative solutions that bring healing to situations of conflict and allow people who are at enmity with one another to discover their common humanity.

Jesus' sayings – "turn the other cheek", "hand him your coat as well", "go the extra mile" (Matthew 5:38-41) – are almost always completely misunderstood. Jesus was not advocating a "doormat" mentality where we let people walk over us. His hearers are people who were subjected to institutionalised indignities and forced to stifle their inner outrage at the dehumanising treatment meted out to them by the hierarchical system of caste and class, race and gender, age and status, and as a result of imperial occupation. Jesus was advocating practical initiatives which would challenge and lampoon the hierarchical system and strip its perpetrators of their power to dehumanise the underdogs.

"Turn the other cheek" can only be understood if the system of backhanded insults from master to underling which operated in Jesus' day is understood. "Hand him your coat as well" can only be understood if the system of hired day labour and the taboo on nakedness in Judaism is understood. "Go a second mile" can only be understood if the Roman imperial system of impressing services upon conquered peoples is understood.

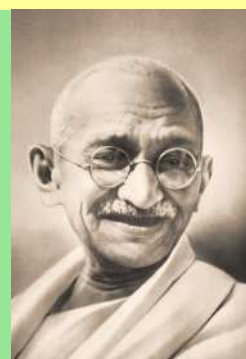
Jesus' suggestions provided a hint of how to take on the entire system in a way that unmask its essential cruelty and caricatures its pretensions to justice, law and order.

Jesus recommended using one's experience of being belittled and dispossessed to seize the initiative from the oppressor, who is thrown off-balance when he or she finds the reaction of the oppressed totally outside his or her experience and forces him or her to recognise your humanity.



The ultimate end of Jesus' advice is to win oppressors over to the way of justice and truth; to change their hearts

The world needs people of vision who can unmask the essential cruelty of worldly systems of power and bring liberation from the vicious cycles in which we become trapped



This pamphlet is part of a series on aspects of Catholic education for teachers, parents and board members, produced by the Ethos Committee of the Catholic Schools Board of the Archdioceses of Pretoria and Johannesburg



The Haven • St Vincent School for the Deaf • Jellicoe Avenue • Melrose
PO Box 2635 Saxonwold 2132 • Tel +27 (0) 11 447 9219/9211 • Fax +27 (0) 11 447 9129
E-mail info@cso.za.or