

It may be that not many of you reading this are devoted to the television programme *Desperate Housewives*, as I am. It is, I admit, unrealistic and absurd, and yet it is also a very moral series. People have to face up to the consequences of their actions. People behave badly, selfishly, or do what they think is best and find that the results are not always what they expected. Gabby, selfishness personified, interferes in another family's affairs for her own ends and loses the very thing she hoped to gain. Lynette sabotages her husband's chances of going back to university assuming it is a mid-life whim, and finds out too late how much it meant to him as a person and as a husband and father. Characters find that the people they dislike have a reason for being bad-tempered or unfriendly and that things are much happier when they understand each other and make allowances for each other.

Recently, Bree, the uptight, conventional one, who (I'm afraid) is the only regular church-goer, was asked by her pastor to help someone who was going through a bad patch. She readily agreed, until she found out it was the new wife of the most hated man on their street. (His vileness is too complicated to explain.) She and the pastor then had a rather witty, rapid, exchange of biblical quotations, he proving why she should help the woman, she explaining why she should not. I noticed that the pastor's were New Testament and Bree's were Old Testament, which seemed rather fitting. The OT often seems harsh and negative – 'thou shalt not' – while the NT is more kindly - 'thou shalt'. We all know the Ten Commandments, which are mostly telling us what we must not do, and we know Jesus's summary of the law 'you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind ... and your neighbour as yourself.' (Matthew 22, 37-39.)

I'm not the person to expound this, but it is instructive to look through the gospels and see how Jesus taught morality: our behaviour towards each other. (I always find it useful to read the Bible, or any serious book, with an aim or a question in mind.)

Staying with Matthew, Jesus's first main teachings are the Beatitudes, which start off as nine simple statements in two parts. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'. Although apparently simple, they are not always easy to understand. Who are the 'poor in spirit'? How will the meek inherit the earth? They are not even definitive because Luke gives a rather different selection of eight, four beginning 'blessed are' and four beginning 'woe to you'. As Robert pointed out in the New Start course, the different content of the gospels makes them more, not less, convincing. Each author was remembering things slightly differently, or wanting to make a different point. In Matthew Jesus goes on to make more statements but with more explanation: 'you are the salt of the earth', 'you are the light of the world' etc. He then goes on to discuss some 'thou shalt nots', based partly on the Ten Commandments, explaining why these actions are wrong and what we should do instead. These can be uncomfortable, suggesting, for example, that being angry with someone is on the road to murder. And are we really to pluck out our right eye, or chop off our right hand? A lot of Jesus's teaching was based on the Jewish religion and the Old Testament, but he took it further, sometimes contradicting the old interpretation and sometimes expanding it.

Later in the gospel most of the teaching is in parables. But don't take my word for it. Read it for yourselves. Seeing how Jesus taught can help us to understand what he taught.

PS Bree did help the new wife, but it all went wrong when the new wife apparently hid a pistol under a cushion in Bree's house, then found it and accused Bree of planting it there so it would have her finger prints on it and implicate her in the shooting of her own husband. This being *Desperate Housewives* the truth is even more complicated, and I'm not sure there is a moral to be drawn from it.

Mary Alexander, May 2011.