

SERMON FOR THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIHANY – YEAR A

Heavenly Father, give us faith to receive your word, understanding to know what it means, and the will to put it into practice, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

As we continue reading through Jesus' Sermon on the Mount again this week, it can be easy to remember the nice bits that are gentle and soothing, such as "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth", and forget the bits such as those we have just heard this week. In this part of his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus uses provocative language to drive a message home: sin isn't just about what we do, it's also about what is in our heart.

It looks at first glance as if Jesus is making the Law of God ridiculously hard to keep. But Jesus is rather moving beyond the letter of the Law to the spirit of the law and lays down higher standards for people wishing to obey the law of God.

Four times in today's gospel reading we find Jesus saying, "You have heard it said" ... "But I say to you" ...

The first subject that Jesus addresses is anger. The Old Testament Law that he looks at is the commandment against murder in the Ten Commandments. However, Jesus goes beyond just murder and proclaims the same punishment for a person who is angry with someone else. The issue with murder for Jesus is much more than just the death of another individual. Jesus is saying that sooner or later our inward disposition will show up on the outside in how we treat others. It begins with an attitude that disregards the value of that other person, making his or her life of no importance.

Jesus even places the resolution of our human conflicts above our worship of God, when he says, "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." In other words, worship of God is meaningless as long as we live with broken human relationships. Persons matter so much to God that he requires that we mend our relationships with other people before bringing our gifts to him.

Then comes his teaching about adultery and divorce. Jesus is once again saying that sooner or later our inward disposition will show up on the outside in how we treat others. Once again, it begins with an attitude that disregards the value of that other person, objectifying others for our own purposes and needs.

Then Jesus seems to go even further, suggesting that if we are guilty of these sins, we need to gouge our own eyes out or cut our hands off. I find it interesting that even the most stringent of biblical literalists don't advocate for taking this teaching word-for-word. If they did, there would be a lot of Christians walking around with missing eyes and limbs. Had this saying been taken literally by Christians throughout the centuries, his followers would have always been a fairly macabre group of people.

The related teaching about divorce is from the book of Deuteronomy. Under Jewish law and custom, a man could divorce his wife if there was something objectionable about her. The rabbis of Jesus' time discussed intensely about what "objectionable" things might be sufficient cause for a divorce. Some of the suggestions included such trivial matters as burning the husband's meal, or that a wife hadn't kept her looks up.

Divorce left women vulnerable in that society, as it can even today. Jesus states that adultery is the only thing which could possibly be sufficiently objectionable for a man to divorce his wife. In saying this, Jesus is attempting to safeguard the rights of a wife, trying to overcome the idea that she could simply be seen as a disposable item if she in any way displeased her husband. Unfortunately, Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce have often been used against women, by suggesting that women should stay put at all costs in their marriages, even if they are abusive. This is exactly the opposite intent of Jesus' teaching here. Jesus seeks to protect women from the unjust laws which could easily cast women out of their homes and into poverty and despair.

The fourth subject is that of oaths. Ours is not the first age that has had to deal with the issue of 'post-truths' or 'alternative facts'. Lying was actually fairly common in Jesus' time and place. If people wanted you to really believe what they were promising, they would swear on something relating to God, such as the Temple, or heaven, or the holy city of Jerusalem. Jesus' point here is that the word of those who follow him should be truthful and reliable, without having to swear an oath. Yes means yes, no means no, and no oaths should be necessary to convince others that we are telling the truth.

So what do we make of these teachings of Jesus for today. As I said earlier, at first glance, it seems that Jesus is making it even more difficult to follow the laws and rules. However, the teachings of Jesus in the gospel today are not intended to create more laws, but are rather about transcending legalism with love.

I am convinced that the church will continue to decline until we realise that the gospel is not about rules and regulations. For the Gospel to be Good News it has to be proclaimed in a way that shows that the Gospel, at its heart, is about relationship.

It is only in being in relationship with the God of love that we can be secure in God's love and transformed by God's unconditional acceptance. This is something that fearful rule-makers and law-keepers cannot understand. As humans, we are at our best not from fearful conformity, but from actions and deeds that promote human flourishing. As followers of Jesus, it is not enough for us to hear Jesus' words; to study them and to be inspired by them. We need to ACT on them; practice them and live them in our everyday lives, to go beyond what we are required to do, and to love even more.