

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY – 16th February 2014 7.00am Eucharist 8.00am Eucharist 9.30am Solemn Eucharist Readings: Deuteronomy 10:12-22; Psalm 119:1-8; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37

Recently in Florida in the USA, atheists erected a monument of the Ten Commandments – atheist ones – on the courthouse lawn. Some examples: “An atheist believes that a hospital should be built instead of a church.” “An atheist believes that a deed must be done instead of a prayer said.” “An atheist strives for involvement in life and not escape into death. He wants disease conquered, poverty banished, war eliminated.”

We’ve all heard of the straw man – using misrepresentation or exaggeration to destroy or discredit someone’s point of view. So the line of thinking implies that if you’re in favour of building a church, you must be opposed to building a hospital. If you pray you obviously mustn’t be performing good deeds.

Another criticism of religion is that it consists of rules and regulations that prevent us living a full and happy and flourishing life, whereas atheists are all about freedom to be who you are. The words of Jesus in today’s Gospel might seem to give some fuel for that criticism. He takes the righteousness of the strictest sect of his day, the Pharisees, and tells any who would be his followers that they’ve got to do better even than that.

Today’s Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy places Jesus’ words within the context of Israel, the people to whom the law of God, the Torah, was given. One of the chief criticisms leveled at the early Christian communities was that they aimed to do away with the Torah, the law of God. Matthew’s Gospel is believed by most scholars to have been written by a third-generation Christian some time in the closing decades of the first century C.E.

In today’s reading Jesus seems intent on reassuring his listeners that he hasn’t come to do away with the law at all. The Deuteronomy passage says, “So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you?” The answer is contained in some key words: *fear* the Lord, *walk* in his ways, *love* and *serve* him, *keep* his commandments “for your own well-being.” Jesus said we were not made for the Sabbath but the Sabbath was made for us. All God’s commandments were made for our benefit.

We sometimes hear it said about modern society with all its problems that what we need is tougher laws, that there are no standards anymore; that we need more rules. In fact there are a far greater number of rules today than certainly when I was a child. I remember when tobacco products were advertised on TV, when wearing a seatbelt wasn’t compulsory, when you could put a baby bassinet on the back seat of a car with no restraints at all. There are tighter laws surrounding insurance and Work, Health & Safety and so on. Many if not most of these laws have been a good thing. So the problem would not seem to be that there are too few rules.

Jesus and St Paul after him saw how keeping rules doesn’t bring freedom, it’s not the way to a relationship with God, and it’s an easy morality. Theologian James Alison talks about ‘systems of goodness.’ “A system of goodness works by having rules which determine who is in and who is out. If some of the rules are hard to keep, so much the better, since that gives the impression that what is in fact a tragically easy form of goodness is, rather, heroically difficult” (James Alison, *Broken Hearts and New*

Creations, Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 2010, p. 83). He says it's a trap. These systems depend on the mechanism of us-against-them and that people become driven by them.

Today's Gospel opens with several antitheses: this is what you have heard, but I'm telling you this. It's not mere common sense or advice on how to get ahead in the world. There's plenty of advice on how to do all that. Jesus is about something far more radical and far-reaching. The word radical means to go to the heart or root of something.

Jesus then gives some examples. The old commandment said, "You shall not murder." People would hear that commandment and think, "No problem. Not guilty. I can tick that box." But Jesus goes to the heart, literally, of the matter and talks about anger and insults and other ways we can hurt others. Obeying rules is easy compared to Jesus' antidote which is reconciliation with those from whom we are estranged. This is important enough to put off an offering to God in the Temple.

Notice that Jesus says not, "if you remember that *you* have something against your brother or sister..." but "if you remember, i.e., suspect, that your brother or sister has something against *you*. . . ." Our anger isn't the main issue. The whole point is to actively recognise the angry feelings of others and then to take steps to defuse them. The advice to "settle out of court" as it were may have some very practical value, but Jesus also reinforces the fact that one day we'll all stand before God. God's judgement is not to be seen as a threat but as God's way of repairing all that brings harm to humanity, repairing the brokenness of creation. We share in that process of repairing, of God's *good* judgement, when we engage in reconciliation with those from whom we're estranged.

Next Jesus deals with sexual behaviour. Again, the old commandment, 'You shall not commit adultery' was easy compared with the way Jesus deals with it. Dealing with sexual behaviour doesn't begin with deciding on a set of rules. In my first parish I sat in a room filled with young people. After the evening services we gathered for supper at someone's house. I'd suggested a question box where they could anonymously ask any question they liked. One of the questions was, "How far can you go when you're kissing and cuddling with your boyfriend or girlfriend before you're committing a sin." The question was looking for an answer based on some line that when crossed placed you in the realm of sin. Where was that line? I suggested that the question itself was the wrong question to ask.

Jesus' words about lust in the heart when looking at a woman have caused many to give up and say this is impossible. What exactly does one have to imagine before one is committing adultery in the heart? Again, it's the wrong question. We're being drawn into the trap of systems of goodness that James Alison identifies.

The problem concerns attitude. Is this person no more than an object to satisfy one's desire (lust)? Or is she/he a fellow human being with whom dealings, sexual or otherwise, should be based on equality and mutual respect? Jesus' graphic advice on gouging out eyes and cutting off hands is obviously not to be taken literally but to shock the hearers into a radical new way of seeing our fellow human beings. Sexuality has to do with the totality of who we are, including the body. Using someone's body or mind or anything else, purely as an instrument is to treat them with less than the respect they deserve. The fullness of sexual expression cannot be fully experienced without the risk and sacrifice as well as the exhilaration and joy of a committed relationship that reflects the love of God for us his creation.

That leads naturally to the related subject of faithfulness in marriage. The old commandment looked at the whole issue exclusively from the perspective of the man. If he grew tired of his wife, all he had to do was to give her a bill of divorce that declared the marriage over. Matthew has Jesus making no provision for divorce whatsoever, except in the case of adultery. That has been read as a legal ruling which it isn't. Jesus is presenting a vision of marriage that is even more radical. Instead of a social contract that was based on a man's exclusive sexual and domestic rights to a woman Jesus transforms it into a lifelong union bound by mutual fidelity and the joy of loving companionship rather than law.

Rather than being a burden laid on the shoulders of those whose marriages have failed and have entered into a second marriage, it must be remembered that this was a message of liberation for woman whose rights were non-existent in Jesus' day. It delivered marriage from an institution where all the power was on one side to the original design of God in creation. The fact is humans fail and God is the God of new beginnings. The strict discipline of marriage was meant to be freeing and life-giving not restrictive and death-dealing. We could say, "Marriage was made for humanity, not humanity for marriage."

There same emphasis on fidelity applies in taking oaths. It seems Matthew's community was using oaths in a casual way. Perhaps the everyday transactions of life involved a pledge invoking God's help in life's activities. This was a reversal of the proper relationship between God and humanity. It assumed God could be controlled and domesticated. Dr Tom Long says, "Children of the kingdom do not practice magic; they practice ministry. They walk out the front door into the world and say what they mean – 'yes, yes' and 'no, no' – without trying to conjure up God with pious formulas" (Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1997, p. 62).

Doubtless many of those who heard Jesus' words that day thought they were righteous, until they heard what he had to say about righteousness. May we dare to allow his radical fulfilment of the law to take hold in our hearts and so be witnesses to his kingdom in our midst.