

## **Sermon, Sixth Sunday after Epiphany**

**Sunday, 12<sup>th</sup> February – Brookton and Beverley**

In our reading from the Gospel of St Matthew this morning, in which Jesus speaks of the laws concerning anger, adultery, divorce and oaths, Jesus offers a somewhat radical approach to understanding the law. While emphasising the ongoing importance of the law, Jesus is keen for his listeners to move their mindset away from the mere external observance of the law to the spirit of love which fulfils the law. Whereas the religious authorities had been totally committed to the law of God, Jesus contends that they had gone about things in the wrong way. They were interested in outcomes; God was interested in attitudes.

Jesus shows us that the Law of God, that is, his will for the way human beings should relate to another, is not something that we, as Christians, can ignore. He says, 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.' Jesus wasn't tearing down the precious gift of God's law, which God had given to Moses all those centuries ago. Throughout his earthly life, Jesus showed us how the law of God should be lived, ie from the heart. It wasn't just a matter of going through the motions, and making sure you didn't get caught out on the big things. That's why the Ten Commandments are still God's guidelines for the way people should relate to one another, even today.

The Pharisees tried hard to obey the letter of the law and failed. If we should try the same approach, we are doomed to do so also. It is somewhat akin to a mission impossible. What Jesus says today about life in the kingdom in today's passage should convince you. For following God's law isn't a matter of not getting caught out on the big things and ignoring the little failures. The fifth commandment says, 'You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder.'" It was said to Moses by no less than God himself. So, it's the authoritative word of God. 'But I tell you' Jesus says. 'There is more to this commandment than you've been taught. It's not just the act of murder that's the problem, but the attitude that leads to it.'

We might sit here comfortably while Jesus talks about murder. However, when suddenly Jesus widens the net, and we're caught for Jesus says "Anyone who is angry with his others will be subject to judgement.' Which of us hasn't been angry? Who hasn't cursed

or muttered about someone else. We might well ask, what kind of impossible standard is Jesus laying down? It's probably not so hard to evade the letter of the law, to make ourselves as small a target as possible. Murder is a big thing, but everyone gets angry.

Or what about the other commandment that Jesus focuses upon, 'You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' Does that mean that if I haven't committed the physical act, I'm safe? No, Jesus says. 'I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.' It's not just the act but also the attitude. You and I aren't off the hook just because we haven't done the deed in the flesh.

What is Jesus asking of us, by tightening up the law of God so much that we have nowhere to run, nowhere to hide? He's pointing to the inherent dishonesty in our human nature that makes us think that we can appease God by only committing little offences. God sees into the heart. He is showing us that our need for him and what he brings us is greater than we ever appreciated. We simply cannot obey God's law as natural human beings.

What's needed is a whole new approach, a change of attitude. Which is of course, exactly what we, as kingdom people, receive from Jesus; a new heart and a new mind. We have the Holy Spirit to safeguard our thoughts and direct our actions. God's law, as Jesus teaches us here, forces us to examine ourselves. Jesus asks us to be honest about our deception, our self-justification, in which we excuse our anger, or our lust, because we can't help it.

And even then, we still fail. We aren't always people of integrity. We drag our old nature around. 'Don't hide your failures', Jesus says. 'Bring it out in the open, repent of it, and aim for kingdom values.' 'When you fail, remember that I died for you, so that your sinful failures would be forgiven. Remember his words at the Last Supper: 'this is my blood, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'

The reality of forgiveness means that we can honestly confront our failures. Our anger at and disputes with others, threats and spiteful words against workmates, lustful thoughts, even the act of adultery itself; indeed, all the things which Jesus brings to our attention in this passage. We can let God's word convict us and lead us to say, 'I'm sorry.' It's then that we are freed from our failures, to begin fresh and energised. Then we are free to live in a loving, constant relationship with Jesus, who promises us; "I am with you always, to the end of the age.' There'll never be a time when we're on our own; free but guided and

protected by a loving God, who asks that we call him Father, and who is always listening for our prayers.

This is the background against which we must place the words of Jesus today. Words which people have criticised for being unrealistic, harsh, impossible. Today Jesus gives some shape to his call that we are to be 'the salt of the earth...and the light of the world'. What Jesus never meant to do in the Sermon on the Mount is to give us a complete handbook entitled 'How to be a Christian in three easy lessons.' Instead, he focuses on certain aspects of life and teaches us how kingdom values are to be lived out in that environment.

As kingdom people, Jesus urges us to let go of the sins and failures of the past and to aim to live like him. He specifically addresses our life in relationship with others. Don't let anger rule. Let the fruits of the Holy Spirit be in evidence: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Seek reconciliation with people who have wronged you. Why? Because that is what God has done for you. He has sought you out and made peace through Jesus. God doesn't nurse grudges. Nor should we. Try as hard as we can to live in peace with other people. Don't let things deteriorate to the point where legal action is contemplated. Be aware of the temptations to adultery that you face. Work hard at growing your marriage relationship. Give it all the strength God graciously supplies.

These are some of the ways that kingdom people live out their personal relationship with Jesus. This is just a tiny segment of the whole shape of kingdom life. Let us place ourselves at God's service and let him fill in the whole picture of life under his guidance.

When the Christian removes the wrongful thought (anger, dislike, hate) or feeling (lustful employment of the eye and the hand) from the inmost soul, the command of God then has free course in our willing and doing. One's language needs oaths when absolute truth is only considered to be an option. When love for the Lord fills the heart, the law serves as an avenue of peaceful, pure and truthful loving relationships between people.

In these matters our readings from Deuteronomy and St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians are similarly informative. In the passage from Deuteronomy we are told that what the Lord God requires of his people is "Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD and his decrees that I am commanding you

today, for your own well-being.” Later in the passage the writer goes on to explain how this might be lived out – “Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the LORD your God; him you shall serve; to him you shall hold fast; and by his name you shall swear. He is your praise; he is your God who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen.” And finally, the people of Israel are reminded that God is with them, for whereas they were small in number when they went down to Egypt the LORD God has made them as numerous as the stars in heaven. Even in this exhortation of Deuteronomy we can see this need for right attitude in carrying out the Law, as opposed to simple and sheer legalism, which became the means of power and domination by the religious authorities.

In St Paul’s Letter to the followers in Corinth we are reminded that both the creation and the fostering of faith are the work of God alone. What St Paul observes is that while the ministers of the congregation at Corinth have sown the word of God the people have not grown and advanced beyond spiritual infancy the way they might. Instead, they have, thought themselves very knowledgeable and looked to, and for, human wisdom, and thereby chose favourites according to particular ministers’ particular styles. As St Paul tells them, they are functioning according to their lower sinful natures and not seeking to see themselves as God’s field, God’s building. They have failed to become Kingdom people.

While emphasising the importance of the law, the Lord moves beyond the mere external observance of commandments to the spirit of love which fulfils the law. As Hymn 630 in *Together in Song* says:

*The law of Christ alone  
can make us free,  
and love is the fulfilling of the law.*

As children of our God  
we're sisters, brothers:  
but will God's love  
to all the world be known  
if we do not  
reflect his love to others?  
In charity and justice  
God is shown.

*The law of Christ alone  
can make us free,  
and love is the fulfilling of the law.*

Millions believe the law  
of life is cunning  
within a world of cruelty and greed;  
how can they know  
God's charity and justice  
if helping hands have never  
reached their need?

*The law of Christ alone  
can make us free,  
and love is the fulfilling of the law.*

Christ is at work through us  
who are his body,  
he chooses us to witness  
and to teach,  
to heal and raise  
and liberate and strengthen,  
to be his hands and eyes,  
his heart and speech.

*The law of Christ alone  
can make us free,  
and love is the fulfilling of the law.*

There is no promise  
that we shall not suffer,  
no promise that we shall  
not need to fight;  
only the word that love  
is our redemption  
and freedom comes  
by turning to the light.

*The law of Christ alone  
can make us free,  
and love is the fulfilling of the law.*