



Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

13th February 2011

*Deuteronomy 10:12-22, Psalm 119:1-8, 1 Corinthians 3:1-9,
Matthew 5:21-37*

May I speak in the name of the one God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen

There's a chilling line that runs through the book of Judges right down to the last verse: "*In those days there was no king in Israel. All the people did what was right in their own eyes.*" And I heard the same tone in a restaurant recently: a young woman said to her friends, 'I'm 18 now, I can do what I like.' And I find it terrifying that our culture gives to our young people no more help in working out how to live than 'I can do what I like'. Don't get me wrong; it's good to have freedom to do what is right in our own eyes, and fun sometimes to what we like, so long as what I like is fun for other people and good in the long run for me and for them. But we're all aware of the cost in our society of living by impulses, which we're encouraged to do, in terms of the mess that they make of their lives and the mess they make of other people's lives in the process.

I was cheered by a news report this week about a man from some beat-up part of Los Angeles where young people, young men in particular, are being drawn into crime and gang warfare and drug addiction and he's pulled out some of these ex-convicts and ex-drug addicts and turned them into, of all things, a cricket team. Sounds bizarre! But he reckons cricket is a game which teaches civility – that was his word – and restraint and respect for rules, and respect for other people. Well we know that's not quite how it is at the professional level these days, sadly, but I think he's right; I think that's what the game is about and at its best it does do that. So I thought that was completely bizarre, but actually rather wonderful - this ramshackle cricket team who will actually look like reformed baseball players really in the way they play. But they're over here now playing some games with various teams.

Certainly those things he names – civility, restraint and respect - are qualities we all need if we're going to live well and not just do what we feel like. So what does Moses say about living well? We heard it just now: 'So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? 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.' To fear God and to love God: fear God because God is God and we'd better be terrified, and love God because God is God, God who brought us into being, who loves the weak and the needy especially, and teaches us to love those who are in need. And we do that by walking in all God's ways – it's a lovely metaphor, life as a walk, a walk that we take with God, and God gives us good ways to walk in. And we do that then by serving God, knowing what God wants; serving God, not just in outward

observance of course, but in our heart and our soul. That's how to live well, Moses says, even more than playing cricket, though I dare say he was pretty good between the wickets! Turning to the Holy One is what it's about, the source of our life, the way to find what's good for others and for ourselves.

Jesus takes this further in his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount where today there's that passage where he's commenting on the law of Moses. The passage has four sections, each beginning, 'You have heard that it was said but I say to you'. And in this case he's quoting from the law and then commenting on it, giving a response to what the law says about murder, about adultery, about divorce and about swearing false oaths. And these are serious matters which we all need to think about if we're going to live and help others to live well, by something less flimsy than doing what we feel like.

Notice that Jesus is not countermanding the law, he's not saying don't do that, listen to me. In each case the law still stands. He's asking us to think more deeply about what the law means, not just what we should do but what kind of person we should be becoming. Take murder, for instance. Every society has a rule about murder – we can't just go about murdering each other when we feel like it – so the law of Moses also says you shall not murder, and do you know, I never have! How about you? That must make us all pretty special, pretty mature, don't you think, spiritually speaking? And Jesus says, 'Very good. Now how about anger?' Have you never been angry with your brother, or your sister, or your spouse, or your child, or your neighbour, or your friend, or your . . . bank manager. Have you never said, 'You fool!' or as the Greek says literally, 'Have you never said "Raca" to your brother?' I don't know what race means but it doesn't sound very nice, does it.

What are the things we say which diminish people, cut people down, dismiss them? And not only words but the gestures. How we can dismiss somebody with the flick of the wrist, or rolling our eyes, or turning our head away when somebody speaks, turning off your mobile phone when you see who's calling. In the Arab world, a gesture of contempt for someone, one of them, is to point the bottom of your feet at them and you may have seen this on television this week in the crowd in, people taking off their shoes and pointing the bottom of their feet towards the picture of their president, a deeply shaming action, and he got the message and went off in shame, and that is sad. What's dangerous in all this is not the words or gestures themselves, but the anger that underlines them, an anger which potentially disrupts every committee, every church, every school, every marriage, every nation. And there always will be anger whenever I get together with someone else and discover that I can't do what I like because they've got other ideas. If I'm seething with anger – maybe that's overstating it, if occasionally I'm seething with anger but I haven't murdered anybody, why is that? Because there's a law against it and I'm afraid of the consequences? That just means I'm not only angry but also a coward and that's no great virtue, is it?

There's a particular problem in Christian circles and I think it's because we've listened to Jesus too well on the subject of anger, at least in the superficial sense. We think, 'well I mustn't murder, and I mustn't be angry, or at least mustn't be seen to be angry. And so we bury our anger and it turns into a cold, slow-burning resentment which is even more destructive. It causes us to do odd things - we undermine people's projects, we tell lies about them, we spread malicious rumours, and we tell ourselves we don't do these things. As someone said to me the other day, 'I never repeat gossip, so listen very carefully to this because I'll only say it once.' I saw a cheerful notice in a doctor's surgery recently that said, 'The best way to make yourself ill if you're not is to find someone to blame for everything that happens to you and then be sure not tell them'. Let it stew. Well I'm sure none of this happens here.

But St Paul had obviously observed the effects of unspoken anger in Ephesians 4.26. He says, 'Be angry, but don't sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger and make no room for the devil.' Sin is in the concealment even more than the anger. We need to have the courage to say what's on our mind and deal openly and honestly with one another. And Jesus tells us that when you're offering your gift at the altar and your brother or sister has something against you, (or I would say when you remember you have something against them), he says leave your gift there and go and be reconciled first. Now the picture's almost absurd. People went to the temple in Jerusalem to bring gifts to the altar from all over the place, so you might have travelled from Galilee up to Jerusalem dragging your animal for an offering, and suddenly your conscience slights you. So you find someone and say, 'Hang on to this goat will you? I'll be back by Thursday.' But it makes the point: what are the niggles about my neighbour that are keeping my heart from God?

Anglicans on the whole don't bring goats to try to put into the communion plate, the offertory, but I think it's to remind us about that that the church has reclaimed the ancient practice of the sharing the sign of the Peace, and we do it in the Eucharist before the offertory, before we bring our gifts to the altar. Not to be matey together – 'Oh, how are you today?' – but as a reminder that we stand before God and we need to stand together and be at peace with one another, be reconciled, in whatever way that is. Of course it isn't automatic: we all know it's quite possible to shake hands and grizzle in our heart, and there are churches where people refuse to share the sign of the peace, and I wonder what that's about. But on the whole I think it's a helpful reminder, and then if we haven't got the message yet it's there in the Lord's Prayer too, which we say immediately before we come up to the altar to receive communion: 'forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us' – with a clear message that if we can't forgive we will not be open to the forgiveness that God wants to give us.

So much for anger then; we see that Jesus is urging us to think more deeply, go behind the law, which we know about which we observe most of the time, apart from the speed limits, to see the reasons why a law is needed, to become aware of what's going on in our heart and mind, what's keeping us from God, what's keeping us from being at peace with one another and ourselves. And he makes the same point then about

three other topics – adultery, divorce and oaths. And so more briefly, yes, there's a law, 'You shall not commit adultery', but what's the real problem here, he says. He says it's the lustful look, the lustful thought, the lustful imagination. And he says these are not just the cause of adultery and the thing we need to deal with, they are as bad as the outward action itself.

Likewise there's a law 'Do not swear false oaths'. But Jesus says, why do we need to swear oaths at all? Doesn't that imply that most of what when we're not swearing an oath we can't be relied on to keep? What God loves and what's good for us and our souls is truthfulness, so Jesus says, become people who say what we mean and mean what we say and then oaths won't be needed. Likewise divorce, which was very easy in Jesus' day, for men at least. One teacher said you could divorce your wife if she burnt the dinner, well that's pretty serious – not for the man of course, but for the woman because in that society the consequence was that the wife would be out on the street looking for another man to support her and her children, and therefore effectively causing her to commit adultery. Well, times have changed of course, but again Jesus doesn't get involved in the argument for or against divorce. He says, be aware, think what you're doing to a person you've made promises to. Is this the way you think things should be?'

So in all this Jesus is not attacking the law of Israel, and he's not making any new laws either. He's simply saying, 'the world is like this, and it could be like that'. And he invites us to grieve with God over the state of the world, and in particular the state of our heart and mind and soul, and he asks us to make some decisions about becoming the kind of person we'd like to be in some deeper sense. It seems to me he speaks with a confronting realism and with infinite compassion. So he doesn't accuse, he invites us to learn what we need to learn about walking in the way that leads to the Life. Can I do what I like? No. So what do I need to do? What kind of person do I need to become, and how do I plan to take the next step on this walk with God?

The Lord be with you
John Dunnill