

Sixth Sunday in Epiphany 16 February 2014

I want to just mention a few things from the gospel this morning but in passing did you note the call in the Deuternomy reading to “love the stranger and provide food for the orphan and widow”? This is to be done, the Deuternonomist suggests, both out of the command to love without favour as God loves us and because we all were or will be strangers on the land at some point. How far we seem to have come as a nation from such enlightened wisdom from a so-called primitive culture 1000’s of years ago.

The gospel passage we heard from Matthew, placed as a continuation of the Sermon on the Mount, is rarely heard because we don’t usually have so many weeks in this season of Epiphany. In it Matthew, writing for a Jewish-Christian community, clearly presents Jesus as one who upholds the Law and the Prophets. That includes fulfilling what they predicted but also making sure what they intend is taken seriously. According to Matthew, Jesus did not come to present a new set of commandments to replace the old, but to teach what the eternal commandments always meant.

Today’s passage takes in the first four of six contrasts which Matthew presents (he loves multiples of 3) in order to show what doing God's Law really means and where its priorities lie. We can hear the commandments and not understand what they are really about. That is why Matthew introduces these six contrasts by saying: "you have heard that it was said to the people of old". It is like saying: you know what they said the commandments meant? Well, let me tell you what they really mean!

The first topic is hate or harboured anger. Jesus is saying: the important thing is not just to resist violence, but also the hate which leads to it. It is not a condemnation of the feeling of anger, as the Gospel writers had no hesitation in speaking of Jesus becoming angry. It is what you do with your anger that counts. Anger turned to hate abuses people, often starting with words. Jesus lists some of them, saying: if you take the command, "Do not kill", seriously, then you will not embrace hate and let your anger turn to abuse of

others. You will write no one off. The fifth contrast will speak of retaliation - also a form of hate. The sixth contrast matches the first because it has the same theme: love your enemies. In Jesus' teaching the foundation is God's love and openness to all, based of course upon his deep Jewish understanding of texts like the Deuteronomy one I have commented on.

When we truly believe God's goodness and generosity towards us, then we will not write ourselves off and we will not write others off. This runs counter to some very strong values embedded in human society, perhaps laid down through evolution in times when survival required fight. These days we often entertain ourselves and our children with fantasies about how to kill people.

There is a certain attraction in being able to divide people into those we love, those we hate, and those we don't know or care about. It seeds racism. It rescues us from complexity and the messiness of needing to think, and to engage the unfamiliar and less amenable to us and our ways. The religious form of this is to deem some people as never having been chosen, never having been of worth, not counting. Religions use it to rationalise rejection. It is easier to eliminate people in this way than to take up the challenge of respecting them, engaging them, and seeking a right relationship with them.

There are two more teachings about anger; the first having a touch of humour to it. Someone has something against you? Then go back home and sort it out - even if it means a few days' journey! It is really a powerful way of urging people to deal with conflict directly and immediately. Later Matthew's Jesus instructs people to put effort into sorting out problems of wrongdoing in the community and approaching them with compassion and prayer.

We still need that wisdom: don't gossip, don't just sit on it - deal with it. When Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers", it is clear from Matthew's gospel, that he did not mean,

blessed are those who sweep things under the carpet, or those who lie to themselves and others about pain. If it hurts, say so. Deal with it and help others deal with pain and conflict. Be a life-bearer, not a death-bearer - for others' sake and also your own. Matthew seems to have had a good understanding of what it meant to be church: it includes dealing with anger and conflict.

Feelings matter. They are natural responses, like hunger and thirst. What you do with them is important. The second contrast has been misunderstood as though it is saying: any man who looks at a woman and has a sexual response to her, finding her sexually attractive, has committed adultery with her in his heart/mind. That is not what the text says. It uses the word for "woman" but then speaks of adultery, which takes place only in relation to a married woman.

So it is about responses to married women. In a culture where most women were married very young, it had an important application. The Greek of Matthew does not mean: looking with a result that one has sexual feelings, but looking with a view to lusting after her, wanting to commit adultery with her. The issue is not having sexual feelings, but what one does with them. As with anger, if you have them and harbour them towards a married woman, then you are in effect an adulterer in your mind. Get your mind sorted.

Clearly Jesus is addressing men, but what he says to men about their sexuality has great importance for both men and women. If we misunderstand the text as saying that finding women sexually attractive is sin, as many came to do, then women would be a constant problem for men. They should be controlled, covered up. Otherwise they will be to blame for men sinning. Some thought that holy men should avoid them altogether.

It is clear that this was not Jesus' response. His advice here makes men responsible for what they do with their own sexuality, not women. This is why he was apparently quite comfortable having both men and women together as his disciples and why some women

even assumed positions of leadership. When a woman wanted to anoint his feet, some around Jesus saw this as dangerous and thought he should send her away.

He did no such thing. He saw her neither as a threat nor as someone to be exploited. Taking responsibility for one's sexuality was so important, that the text used shock tactics to press home the point, advising that people sever their right hand or pluck out their right eye ("right" being the more valuable). People would have understood the rhetoric. Jesus was not commending physical mutilation, but challenging people to be serious about how they managed their sexual responses.

With regard to the third contrast, there was no command about divorce. Divorce became a problem when Judaism began to move away from polygamy. If you embraced the principle of monogamy, adding another wife was not an option. So divorce became the more common option often for trifling reasons. Genesis taught that people were made male and female and when they joined they became one flesh and that was to be permanent. It was to be taken seriously. Matthew's Jesus posits that just as sexual relationships made people permanently one, so it permanently severed any previous relationship. So - no divorce, except but where adultery has taken place, where there **MUST** be divorce.

Across two millennia these words sound harsh, but we need to acknowledge them and their context, which was one where divorces were normally unilateral acts and usually by men. Both our modern circumstances and our biblical heritage have taught us that adultery need not terminate a marriage, for we have learned from the gospel about reconciliation, forgiveness, and new beginnings. Similarly, because Jesus consistently shifted the focus from actions to attitudes, we are able to embrace what the wisdom about human relations has taught us, namely that adultery can be a symptom of something much deeper.

Reconciliation and healing mean dealing with these complexities of the mind and attitude towards which the gospel also points us. Our gospel commitment to marriage and relationship remains, but works itself out in ways that may sometimes see (agreed) divorce as the most creative way forward and may also have us recognising that marriages where adultery has taken place can be retrieved, revived, even to become stronger and more fruitful for having worked through the underlying issues.

The rather strange prohibition of oaths in v's 33-37, can land us in a similar mess of literalism. Paul regularly used oath formulations, swearing by God, that this or that is so. The issue is partly the objectionable attempt to employ God's name in a manipulative way to further one's own ends and partly the failure to use honest straightforward communication. Open communication with integrity means respecting other human beings and invoking the name of God must only be done with sacred respect.

As you can see there is much in this short passage that is deeply relevant to our daily lives. Matthew's collection of Jesus' teachings that we call "The Sermon on the Mount" is a rich treasure chest of wisdom that we have been blessed to walk through over these last few weeks. Why not pick it up sometime at home and really spend some time with Matthew chapters 5-7? God bless you on the journey.

AMEN.

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