

Choosing Life Inside Our Hearts

16 February 2020

Reading: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-37

It was St Augustine some 1,600 years ago who said, “Love God and do as you like.” When the girls were much younger, I thought I would have one of those encouraging chats with my children. “You know,” I said, “you are both intelligent and hardworking girls. You will be able to do whatever you like in life.” I was thinking careers. A little while later I heard Rosemary trying to get Rebecca to make her bed. “I don’t need to mum, Dad said I can do whatever I like.”

As Christians we are often like this. We love the freedom being a Christian gives us. We love being able to fit so easily into the community around us free of the restrictions our spiritual forebears had. We love not needing to stand out in anyway doing what we like.

That is until we read today’s Gospel. Suddenly it’s not enough to not murder, we can’t even get angry. It’s not enough to not commit adultery, we can’t even look at each other with lust.

So, what's going on here?

Jesus is concerned not just with keeping the commandments on the outside, but he is concerned with what’s going on inside as well. With our hearts.

I like the way the Message version puts it. Verse 27 reads: “You know the next commandment pretty well too - don’t go to bed with another’s spouse, but don’t think you’ve preserved your virtue simply by staying out of bed. Your heart can be corrupted by lust even quicker than your body. Those leering looks they also corrupt.”

Jesus is concerned when it comes to murder and adultery with what's going on inside. When we really love God then we only want the best for another person, and that begins in our hearts. Lust and angry thoughts are what give rise to murder and adultery. If we aren't careful, we can find ourselves on a slippery slope to actions we regret.

Jesus knew and we know too that we can so easily keep the outer appearance of morality while having hearts that are far from God.

Once upon a time there were two monks. A senior and much wiser monk and a junior inexperienced monk were travelling together. At one point they came to a river with a strong current. As the monks were preparing to cross the river, they saw a young and beautiful woman also attempting to cross. The young woman asked if they could help her cross to the other side.

The two monks glanced at one another because they had taken vows not to touch a woman especially one as beautiful as she.

Then, without a word, the older monk picked up the woman, carried her across the river, placed her gently on the other side and carried on with his journey.

The younger monk couldn't believe what had just happened. He was speechless after re-joining his companion and an hour passed without a word between them. Two more hours passed, then three, finally the younger monk could contain himself no longer and blurted out "As monks we are not permitted to touch a woman. How could you then carry that woman on your shoulders?"

The older monk looked at him and replied, "Brother, I set her down on the other side of the river three hours ago, why then are you still carrying her?"

Jesus brings us to the heart of the commandments, which is love.

When we really love our neighbour as ourselves then we respect and protect the other person. We will want to live in mutually respectful relationships with gentleness and care. It is hard to do this if our hearts are filled not with love but with lust and anger.

Jesus has a high standard, but it is no less than we need in order to keep the command to love.

It begins not with frantic effort to try and live a good life. It is through no effort on our own rather it is the grace of God. We need to be open to God's grace and invite God into our hearts for, as Jesus reminds us, it is from there that all good and bad comes. Knowing that we are held and loved and cherished by God ourselves gives us the attitude we need in order to love and cherish others.

Long ago Moses put before the people the way that leads to life and joy and the way that leads to fear and death: **See I have set before today life and wealth, death and conflict. Choose the way of life so that you and your offspring will live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him and holding fast to him for that will mean to you life and length of days. Choose life.**

You see there is a great difference between knowing the words of God and living those words. The difference is relationship. Do we have an intimate life-giving relationship with Jesus, or do we just know his words?

After a large dinner party at one of Hollywood's mansions a famous actor entertained the guests with stunning oration from Shakespeare. When he had finished the famous actor asked the audience if they had any requests. A shy old priest asked him if he would give a rendition of the 23rd Psalm. "Yes, I will do that for you," said the actor "on one condition. When I have finished you recite the very same psalm."

More than a little embarrassed the priest agreed. The actor began a beautiful rendition, “The Lord is my shepherd...” The guests clapped loudly. Then it was the priest's turn. She got up and said the same words, but this time there was hushed silence and the beginnings of a tear in several eyes.

The actor with all his training savoured the moment and then stood up. “Ladies and gentlemen, I hope you realise what happened here tonight. I know the words to the psalm but this priest she knows the Shepherd and that makes all the difference.