

## Sixth Sunday of Ordinary time

12 February 2023

### *Message – Challenging the norm*

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O God, Source of All Being, Eternal Word, and Holy Spirit, may the love, joy, and peace of your Kingdom be seen in our lives.

**Amen.**

There was a groan from the archdeaconry clergy at the mention of today's gospel. Yet, it is the kind of challenging passage that is at the heart of the gospel and that should excite us. The get out of jail free card is of course that one can preach on the theme of reconciliation, highlighted in the first segment of today's gospel reading. And, sadly, for many churches that will be the most appropriate message.

The cathedral has its moments but, for the most part, people here allow for, perhaps even encourage and delight in, there being a wide range of views and theological perspectives. In many ways, what we believe is secondary to what we practice and we have a lot of common ground in what we practice, particularly when we try to love one another as Christ commanded. A part of that is making our peace with others when we have absorbed hurts from one another. We symbolically enact this part of this gospel when we share the peace before each eucharist. It can even be a time to actually apologise to someone we have hurt and is always worth taking seriously as this reading encourages us.

The rest of the passage this encouragement to make peace is set in is far more interesting. These are the first four of

Matthew's six antitheses, each framed by, "it was said" and "but I say to you". Having made it clear in last week's gospel that Jesus' life was the real fulfilment of the gospel, Matthew now gives six examples of how Jesus' interpretation reached to the intent of the law and not just the letter of the law.

With the first antithesis, most of us are just delighted when we don't act on those thoughts and intentions that we know not to be loving and kind. To think that even having the thought is a sin is somewhat daunting. Yet, if we are hoping to reveal the Kingdom in our lives that is what needs to happen.

Our path is to become more Christ like and to see the world with God's eyes. So, in the examples given in the gospel, insulting someone, even in our minds, is not showing them love. It reflects a mind that is failing to see them as a precious child of God, whom God loves just as much as God loves us.

None of this is easy. People do from time to time make us angry, or other more colourful adjectives. Anger is itself neutral, we can be justifiably angry which drives us to put things right. But, we need to examine the root of our anger. Is it the behaviour of the person or is it our reaction to what we perceive is happening. When we view a situation with a generous heart and through the eyes of others, we may understand it differently. We will at the very least speak with kindness, understanding and compassion.

The love of God, agape, understood as invincible and unending goodwill, is our goal. If we have this invincible and unending goodwill, what Christ asks of us will come naturally. We will always think the best of others and try to understand them.

We are human, we will mess up, but if our intent is always goodwill, it will be easier to apologise and start afresh.

There will be people who will not respond with goodwill, which is hard to deal with. I am great at being angry in such situations but who does that really hurt? We can try to gently point out to the other person their impact on us, but we must have the grace to accept when they are unable to understand. This can get seriously problematic when the other person is in a position of power. It may be, the best we can do is to remove ourselves from the situation, which can itself be painful and costly. All we can do is continue to reflect God's kingdom in our lives.

The next example, about committing adultery, is as relevant today as it has ever been. When we see a person do we see them as a person in relationship with others who should be respected and loved for who they are and not objectified or used. Put in these terms it is broader than just adultery; are we paying full attention to who the person is and perceiving them with God generous vision of goodwill, care, and compassion, always ready to serve her, him, or them? Ask not what they can do for you but what you can do for them.

Now there is a distinct possibility, if we take this passage literally, that God's kingdom will be made up of severely incapacitated individuals. So, we tend to think of this as just rabbinic hyperbole. Yet, there is a deeper point to it. Some of the things we do run such a great risk of our falling short of God's love that we are better stopping them altogether.

The most obvious are addictions. We are privileged to host AA, Narcotics Anonymous, and shortly, an al anon group, a support

group for relatives of addicts, here at the cathedral. The pattern for AA is completely giving up whatever one is addicted to. It's a hard path but often the only way to find fullness of life. I feel quite humbled meeting people from these groups. They are facing real challenges in life that I find it hard to imagine but they are meeting the challenge, often with a depth of spirituality that would challenge most of us. Are there things that we should remove from our lives. It's a hard question to face up to.

The next part of the passage on divorce must be heard in the light of the gospel as a whole. It is making clear the absolute ideal of the Kingdom. Yet, last time I checked the world is not yet perfect and the second coming hasn't happened. The ridged line that the church held and some parts still holds has done incalculable damage. Relationships are complicated. The pressures of life considerable. Sociologists believe we have significantly less leisure time than did our hunter-gatherer ancestors. Where is the time to invest in relationships? As someone who failed to invest in a relationship in the past, I can assure you that two people being married to their jobs does not build a relationship. We should not be surprised when relationships fail, we should be working to support them.

And, sometimes people are just incompatible with each other. There is much we can do to adapt to one another but when all the adaptation comes from one side the cost may be damaging. While we have an ideal of children growing up with two parents, it is better they grow up with one person who loves them than in a house filled with anger and harm. Do we then claim that this one mistake in life that can't be forgiven and

people must remain single. This isn't consistent with the forgiveness and love at the heart of the gospel.

As the body of Christ our role is not to condemn those whose relationships fail. Christ's response was and is always to forgive with encouragement to go and try to live life differently. As we now understand this passage, it also speaks to injustice and inequality. A man could divorce a woman, possibly without reason, a woman could not divorce a man, probably even for unchastity, though if the law were followed to the letter, she would in that case become a widow, thus solving the problem. It seems likely that Christ was challenging the inequality and failure to recognise the equality of women and men. Every one of us is equally precious and valued in God's sight.

As followers of the way we must fight for equality in relationships and challenge inequality wherever it is found. We must seek and model healthy and balanced relationships, which may sometimes challenge social norms in order to give space for a loving and lifegiving relationship that is not sapped of life as a result of the norms of our society.

And this week's final antithesis is in making oaths and promises. In this example of Christ Jesus' distinctive understanding of the fulfilment of the law and the prophets, Christ rejects the idea of making oaths on anything other than our own integrity. That should be enough, you can't add anything more.

Let your yes be yes and your no be no. Let your love be whole, full hearted, invincible and unending, and let your peace, wisdom and compassion be visible to all. That is the good news, that is our calling.