

Challenge x3

12 2 17

Almighty God,
who alone can bring order
to the unruly wills and passions of sinful humanity:
give your people grace
so to love what you command
and to desire what you promise,
that, among the changes and chances of this world,
our hearts may truly there be fixed
where true joys are to be found.

Our text is part of two verses from today's gospel, Matthew 5, verses 21 & 22:

'You have heard that it was said . . .

But I say to you . . .'

How easy is it for you to be a Christian ? Honestly, do you find Christianity an easy set of principles by which to live ? In the 21st Century, is Christianity an easy yoke to bear ?

Well, to be honest, I became a practising Christian because Christianity seemed to offer me, to promise me, so much. The text that sold me my active belief was 'the peace of God which surpasses all understanding', what Paul wrote to the Philippians in chapter 4 and verse 7 of his Epistle to the church at Philippi. And

that peace, thank God, has been one of the fruits of the Spirit that has largely informed the life I've led. But today, the teaching from the Sermon on the Mount, that Matthew records in his gospel, is pretty disturbing stuff.

Three issues: anger, lust, divorce – and the teaching is anything but easy – so how best to make sense of what Jesus is teaching us ?

First anger – my besetting sin ! First, Jesus reminds us of the sixth commandment 'Thou shalt not kill'. Then he says something shocking – to be angry is wrong too. Anger leads to division and those who are angry with a brother or sister will have to face the judgement of God, just as those who actually kill will. Well, anger is one of the seven deadly sins and what Jesus is doing is highlighting a need to be more loving, more kind, more compassionate. That instead of losing our temper with those who annoy or irritate us, we should try our very best, our utmost, to be on good terms with them, to have a positive relationship with other people. Now I am sure that there are times when one does need to be angry, when a great wrong or serious injustice is being committed – we have in the four gospels the example of Jesus own righteous indignation when he cleansed the Temple in Jerusalem of the money changers and sellers of animal sacrifice. But the challenge of his teaching here is not to be unmoved all the time but to address our casual anger over trivialities. Essentially, we should not be angry people as a default position but angry only when appropriate in the face of serious injustice or wrong-doing.

Second lust. Jesus reminds us of the seventh commandment, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery'. Marriage is the bedrock of a well ordered society and adultery undermines the vows of faithfulness which should inform a proper relationship of mutual respect and support. Well, lust is another of the seven deadly sins but the problem here is Jesus condemns not only wrong-doing but wrong thinking. Even looking at a beautiful person and wanting to get to know them intimately is wrong. I'm not sure you can stop seeing and feeling the natural appreciation of someone who is truly attractive to you but what Jesus is probably condemning is allowing the thought the time and space to root and grow in your imagination so that it fills your mind with what you'd like to do so that you commit the wrongdoing in thought if not in deed. So here, though sexual desire is part of what it means to be a normal human being, we should control those desires instead of having those thoughts run riot in our imagination and control us.

Thirdly, divorce. Jesus acknowledges the fact and possibility of divorce but says it's wrong to divorce unless there is a persuasive reason which in, this case, he identifies as 'unchastity'. Okay, I can live with the principle that marriage should be respected and that divorce should not be a casual option. But, then, I'm not married so what do I know? Simply this, that marriage is a good, a bedrock of our society in the past and if that good goes bad and there is no possibility of reconciliation, then perhaps it is better to part than to stay together in a poisonous relationship.

So there we have it – hard teachings on anger, lust and divorce. But at the heart of Jesus’ teaching is a love of people and a desire that we should be better for how we behave. And I can live with that. Can you ?

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew’s, Dinard

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G: Sermons 35 :Challenge

