

Sixth Sunday of the Year

Readings

Ecclesiasticus 15.15-20

Matthew 5.17-37

If you will, you can keep the commandments; and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice.

Nonsense on stilts. Or rather, more diplomatically, a gross overestimation of the powers of human agency. Much more realistic is St Paul's observation that he understands not his own actions: for he does not what he wants but instead what he hates. The fact is that our moral choices are almost never between fire and water, life and death, good and evil, but between the more or less destructive, the better of goods and the lesser of evils.

And yet there is a danger in this latter view, truer though it may be. Too often we take it too far, and down that path is the sort of fatalism

that conveniently allows us to exculpate ourselves and blame others for our sins of omission and commission both.

A pox then, on both houses.

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What we have before us are the *antitheses* in the Sermon on the Mount: Jesus's commentary on Moses.

You have heard that it was said of old:

you shall not kill;

and, you shall not commit adultery;

and, whoever divorces his wife,

let him give her a certificate of divorce;

and, you shall not swear falsely.

And then, he responds; and we might wish that he hadn't:

If you are angry,
 you will be liable to judgement.

If you insult a brother or sister,
 you will be liable.

If you say "You fool",
 you will be liable to hellfire.

If your right eye causes you to sin,
 pluck it out.

If your right hand causes you to sin,
 cut it off.

Whoever divorces his wife
 or marries a divorced woman
 commits adultery.

Do not swear at all.

This is a hard text; it is hard to know what to do with such a text.

The history of the interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount provides many fascinating examples of how religious people wrestle with difficult bits of Scripture:

problematic texts are marginalised,
not actually dealt with
apparent inconsistencies are harmonised,
not actually reconciled
ideals are relativized,
never actually endeavoured.

We have, for example, tried to say that these moral injunctions apply only to special classes of people, monks and nuns perhaps; certainly not ordinary people like us. *They* should be all zen, but we can throw hissy-fits. *They* should be all chaste, but we can, well, never mind what we can do.

We have also tried to say that Christian morality applies only to a special realm: the sacred and spiritual, but certainly not the secular, let alone the political. God, we think, doesn't mind what we do with our votes or our credit cards.

But, perhaps in response to these readings, some of us have also gone in exactly the opposite direction, resisting such attempts to dull the effect of these difficult words. The likes of Origen and St Francis and Tolstoy and Gandhi have, in their own ways, taken the absolutist option and demanded of themselves the full rigour of these words taken literally. Of some of these words, at least; even saints read selectively. And, in their own ways, they discovered the limits of this approach. And, indeed, their own limits.

As tempting as it is to go with the more permissive readings of today's Gospel text, it is hard to ignore the moral force of imagining the sort of world in which we *could* live like Jesus told us to:

A world without anger;
and in which anger is not necessary.
A world without lust;

without the competition of misaligned
desires.

A world without broken relationships,
but whole individuals giving of
ourselves.

A world in which oaths are unnecessary
because there is perfect trust.

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We cannot take the easy way out: Matthew
forbids it.

Matthew's Jesus separates the sheep—who feed
the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the
captive—from the goats, who do none of these
things.

Matthew's Jesus declares that not everyone who
calls him Lord may enter the kingdom, but the
one who does his Father's will.

Matthew's Jesus came to fulfil the law, and he adds that whoever relaxes the least of them will be himself the least in the kingdom of heaven.

Preachers have been warned.

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Were it only that it were so: that the Wisdom of Sirach were right, in saying that it is a matter of our own choice to live as Jesus demands. But this vision of this world that Jesus casts is not ours to pull up by our own bootstraps. The good news is not that we are now, all of us, moral *übermenschen*, magically transformed by the waters of baptism. We have not become gods. No. The good news is that God has come to join us in this muck; in the moral morasses so often of our own making; in our moral meanderings, God is ever with us; in our succeeding and failing, with

us; in our gathering together and falling out,
with us; in our eating and drinking—the
breaking of bread and sharing of wine—with us.

The good news is that though our choices are few
and our spirits weak, even this will suffice.

Appearances to the contrary, we do not after all
live in a God-forsaken world, but a world which
God has made and calls good, God who calls us to
join in this goodness. This is a hard call, if not
impossible, but it is our call and our end all the
same.

So, there is work to be done. We have ears to
hear and eyes to see that the world is not as God
made it to be, and we are not as God knows us to
be. We have been given each other, and water
and bread and wine for the journey, and so off we
must go, out to love and serve, in Christ's name,
to join in his re-making of this world he loved
into being. We go, in peace, to try and fail, to die

only to be raised up again and again and again: there will always be balm for the injured, bread for the hungry, wine for the weary. We go to do this impossible thing, not because we will succeed but because neither *we* nor *success* are the point. The point is that God's own falling down and raising up is for us the pattern of our lives, the pattern of the faithfulness to which we are called. So we go, and fail the glorious failure that is the better part than cynicism or fatalism or apathy. And then some day—I don't know when, nor how—(but someday) there will be failure no more, and the world will be made new.

Amen.