

Readings for the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

12th February 2023

First Reading: Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Moses said to the people: See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, 'I belong to Paul,' and another, 'I belong to Apollos,' are you not merely human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labour of each. For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.

Gospel: St Matthew 5:21-30, 33-37

On the mountain, Jesus gathered his disciples around him and taught them, saying: 'You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgement." But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, "You fool," you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." But I say to you that everyone who looks at a

woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.” But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be “Yes, Yes” or “No, No”; anything more than this comes from the evil one.’

A Reflection for the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

Quite some years ago now, I was on holiday in South Africa and visited the Kruger National Park. The Kruger is a large park, about 220 miles long and is full of amazing wildlife and scenery. On one of the days of our visit, I was driving between two of the camps we stayed at. It was a journey of over 100 miles, which is a long way when the maximum speed limit is around 30 mph. It was very hot! In the middle of the day, in the heat, nothing stirs – the best time to see wildlife is at dawn and dusk. Suddenly, we saw a movement behind a roadside bush – were we about to be lucky? Alas, no! The movement was that of a South African policeman with a speed camera, and I had allowed my speed to drift up over the limit. Not a lot over, I would say in my defence, but over it none-the-less. Fortunately, the policeman let me off with a warning – as I hope he would have done for anyone in the circumstances. Of course, my friends never let me hear the end of it!

We probably all understand that there is a difference between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. That day in South Africa, I broke the letter of the law by exceeding the stated speed limit, but my speed was still so low that the policeman understood that this was unintentional, that I was at least keeping the spirit of the law. If we understand the spirit of the law as being the intention behind it, in the Kruger the low speed limits are there to protect the wildlife; and luckily for me, the policeman thought that my slightly higher speed wasn't going to significantly increase the risk.

The difference between keeping the letter and the spirit of the law is something that we can learn about from today's Gospel reading. We are familiar with the Ten Commandments, but there is much more to the Jewish Law than just these ten statements. The Books of the Law, known as the Torah, are the first five books of our Old Testament. The Ten Commandments are foundational but there are many others – the accepted total seems to be 613 laws in the Torah. And then there is a wealth of other sacred writings, forming the Talmud, that interpret the laws and apply them to everyday life.

At the study day in Ullapool last November, at one point we discussed people's ability or otherwise to memorise large quantities of text. Whilst there is no doubt that some people are capable of this, and some religious traditions encourage or require it, it seems to me many people would struggle to remember 613 different laws together with their interpretations and applications and then put all that into practice in their own lives. To keep the letter of all these laws would pose a significant challenge to most of us. Challenging though this may be, we must remember that

Jesus said 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law...; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil' (Matt:5:17). The laws still stand. This statement comes just before today's Gospel passage in which Jesus takes three examples of laws and asserts his authority over them. Three times we have 'You have heard that it was said..., but I say to you...'. In each case, Jesus is challenging not the law itself but the attitude that keeps the letter but not the spirit of the law.

In the first example, Jesus associates anger and insults with murder. They may seem to be in different categories of severity to us, but they all deprive others of their humanity in some way and also usurp God's role as judge. Instead, we should seek reconciliation and restored relationships. Similarly, he says that to look lustfully at another person is as serious as committing adultery. Using the examples of eye and hand, he urges us to rid ourselves of those things, perhaps more generally in our minds, that cause us to regard the world, including its people, as commodities to be used for our own gratification. The final example in today's passage is that of swearing oaths. These were common in antiquity and presuppose that a person's word is untrustworthy so needs to be sworn against a higher authority. Jesus dismissed this concept and calls us to be trustworthy and honest, something which requires our words to be backed up by our actions if we are to be consistent and therefore truly trustworthy.

Rather than focus of the letter of the law, especially when there are so many different laws, these examples all urge us to look beyond to the spirit of the law, the intention behind it (insofar as we can understand God's intentions). They illustrate the reality of God's kingdom, a kingdom where there is restoration, inclusion, healing and peace. God's laws are there for the building up of human relationships with God, with our fellow human beings, and with all of God's creation. God's laws offer inspiration and hope for a better way of living than we generally manage on our own.

Following the spirit of God's laws is not easy, of course. We live in a world of conflict, exploitation and distrust and the church is no different. We see that in the reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians – a church that was argumentative and divided and which Paul described as spiritual infants. But we are pointed towards God's kingdom, a kingdom where reconciliation is the norm, where there is restoration of broken-ness in lives, where together we can be made whole. It is a vision to which we as the church are called to aspire.

As always, and as the reading from Deuteronomy reminds us, we have a choice: 'Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him'. 'Choose life' has been a slogan used in a variety of circumstances over the past 40 years or so at least – in films, the world of fashion, and anti-abortion campaigns. Here we have it echoing down the millennia in the words of Moses to the people of Israel. Choosing life means choosing to love God and to obey his laws.

To 'choose life' entails thinking seriously about what obeying God's laws, and the spirit of those laws, means in the circumstances we face in our lives. It means cultivating the attitudes of mind and heart that enable us to follow the spirit of God's laws without need to memorise and worry about the minutiae of the letter of those laws. It means choosing those paths that build and restore relationships. Choosing life is not a one-off decision but an ongoing process, a process of growth that, to use Paul's analogy, helps us to progress from milk to solid food. And it is something that we do together as God's people, helping and encouraging one another along the way. As we approach Lent, a season when we are encouraged to take on some spiritual discipline to help us grow in our faith, it is a timely reminder to consider what we might choose to help that growth, to better understand the spirit of God's law and to put it into practice in our lives.