

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, 16/2/2014, Holy Trinity

Matthew 5:21-37

We continue with our reading of the Sermon on the Mount in which Matthew portrays Jesus as a rabbi on a mountain teaching his disciples who are sitting round him.

To-day we have Jesus speaking of a moral life based on the Commandments.

There were at least a couple of ways of looking at the commandments.

One way was to see the commandment as a rule by which we could judge whether or not a particular action could be termed right or wrong.

For example, when it comes to the commandment about bearing false witness that can be seen as against telling a deliberate untruth.

The moral task then will be to decide whether or not to tell a lady with a new hairdo that it looks great when you really think that it is awful.

Another way of looking at the commandment was to see it as a guide in the formation of our moral character.

Again looking at the commandment about bearing false witness it is not so much about the rule as about the formation of an honest character.

This is the way Jesus looks at the commandments.

To-day's section of the Sermon on the Mount has traditionally been called "Antitheses" because of the pattern in which Jesus presents his teaching.

Jesus says first "You have heard that it was said" then he follows with his own statement "but I say to you".

He is exercising his authority as a teacher by looking at the law and clarifying its true meaning.

The commandments then are not just rules to be followed but by following them we might become formed in a greater righteousness, that is, in right living according to God's standards.

And so we come to consideration of some of the commandments.

How boring! I learnt them in Sunday School and what's more I don't go around killing people, nor do I commit adultery, nor do I tell lies,

well only little ones that I called 'white lies' and they are of no consequence.

Matthew introduces us to a number of these contrasts.

The first is hate or harboured anger.

Jesus knows that even if we keep the commandment not to kill, we can still hate and despise others.

We can follow the rule and still kill a relationship, still treat people as if they were dead to us.

We can gossip, bully, insult and ridicule another person, showing our hatred towards another person and treating others as though they are of worth nothing.

These are all ways in which we can destroy or 'make useless' the other.

Hate and harboured anger come from the heart.

If this is your heart, then deal with it.

Contrast this with the heart of God which is love, compassion, forgiveness and acceptance, in which no one is written off.

God is the source from which you can gain the strength to deal with it and remember that God is with you in every step on the way, loving, forgiving, accepting and not writing you off.

Not only can you deal with hate and harboured anger, but you can deal with adultery that stems from lust and the other contrasts that you find in to-day's reading.

As we look at to-day's Gospel reading and the commandments we can become one of two kinds of people.

One is to be a moral rule keeper and the other is to use the commandments as guides for the formation of our character to be righteous people, people of right living according to the character and heart of God.

In this way we become people who are pure in heart, so that we might love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind and our neighbour as ourselves.