Sermon for 6th in Ordinary Year A

Readings: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37.

i

Perhaps the most significant verses of Deuteronomy 30 have been omitted by our lectionary editors, for vv11-14 say: “What I am commanding you today is **not** too difficult for you or beyond your reach…No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so that you may obey it.”

It is not fair to caricature OT Judaism as being only interested in external, mechanistic observance of the Law and Jesus being interested in the internal disposition of the heart. Deuteronomy makes it quite clear that faith and practice, heart and hands were always expected to work in harmony. How it turned out didn’t match those hopes.

It’s just that people have always found it difficult to keep their heart true to God. We may think the pettifogging rules of *Leviticus, Numbers, Exodus and Deuteronomy* and the code of the Pharisees represent an impossibly unrealistic way of living that micro-manages every tiny detail of behaviour in an attempt to please God. A religion that defines the weight of a fig to be the permissible burden to be carried on the Sabbath would seem utterly unworkable even in a primitive pre-industrial society. It also leads to endless casuistry: it was illegal to carry anything to your neighbour’s house, but if you deposited food before the Sabbath in an adjoining courtyard, it became shared space and so you could get around that prohibition. In similar fashion, if you left two day’s- worth of food on the Sabbath’s limit of 2000 cubits, you could then declare that boundary part of your house and so walk an extra 2000 cubits further.

Whatever Moses may have said in any valedictory speech before his death about keeping the Law, he certainly wasn’t speaking about the Law as it later became. Within the OT we see some of these later accretions to what existed in the days of Moses. The additional and later holiness code, a chiefly post-exilic construction, bears witness to the contention that people have always found it easier to adhere to formal behaviours than keep a true heart. This doesn’t make the law-keeping piety of the Pharisees easy – but an externalised Law is easier than the control of the heart. Many other religions and faith groups subsequent to biblical times prove the same point.

ii

In this passage from Corinthians, Paul is addressing this sort of issue: The Corinthian church is visibly blessed by the Holy Spirit in many dramatic, outward manifestations, but the hearts of the people do not match this outward appearance.

The Corinthian believers may be truly blessed, but they are still behaving like spiritual children. They squabble like infants over the *agape* meal – those who come first help themselves before the poorer ones have finished work and can get along to church.

Like children forming gangs in the playground, they divide up into petty rival groups, some for Paul, some for Peter and some for Apollos, instead of remembering that they should now all be for Jesus.

Personal loyalty is an important moral good, but taken too far it becomes idolatrous and divisive. I am a passionate Methodist; I study the words and works of John and Charles Wesley. I sing their hymns and I have devoted my working life to promoting their cause, but that does not mean I am unable to see the good in the Anglican or Catholic traditions, for example.

I also write about the gifts and witness of a minister who was instrumental in my teenage years in bringing me to a personal faith in Christ. His name is Robin Napier – a name unknown to Methodism at large, but forever a personal hero to me. We all have special affinity with one or two ministers in particular who played a significant role in our lives, but that should never prevent us from seeing the Holy Spirit at work through other ministers.

Finding a focus for our faith in the tradition of our denomination, the life of our local congregation, the witness of a particular priest or minister is to discover God’s stepping stones to faith. They are essential, but they are supposed to lead us across the chasm of unbelief to Christ – not keep us stranded and isolated mid-stream.

iii

So what can we learn from Jesus about all this? Well, Jesus says keeping the 10 Commandments is not enough: Just as Paul told the Corinthians that having spiritual gifts is not enough.

Almost all of us can avoid committing murder – but harbouring anger and even disdain for our brother or sister we contemptuously dismiss as a fool – is far more demanding. Purity of heart is the essence of keeping the Law. By such a measure we all fail.

Bringing your sacrifice to the altar, attending a prayer meeting, or reading the works of Wesley or Luther is pointless if it does not stimulate you to reconcile with your brother or sister.

The majority of us can at least avoid committing adultery, at least I think it’s still the majority of us, but you can still freeze or abuse a marriage to death without cheating with someone else. In Jesus’ time, men were able to discard a wife for far less a sin than adultery, but how does such action dress itself up as being righteous and religious, asks Jesus?

The person who so invokes the name of God may think he is demonstrating his piety and his trustworthiness. In fact, he is revealing the opposite.

The person who casually invokes the name of God and calls upon God for a character reference clearly does not truly know God. God is not to be used for our convenience, to clinch a deal by lending us a façade of respectability and trustworthiness. Anyone who truly knows God would not dare to call upon God for a character reference. For the true believer knows his or her own utter sinfulness beside the absolute purity of God.

The striking symbolism of plucking out your eye and throwing it away or chopping off your sinful hand are evocative images which are there to make the saying memorable, and not to be taken literally. It was a common rabbinic teaching aid.

The grotesque absurdity of the image acts like a parable to drive home the main point of Jesus’ teaching. If we could externalise our faith and divorce it from the purity of our heart, we could then save ourselves from sin by cutting off the offending hand or gouging out the offending eye. Such an idea is obviously ridiculous.

These images are a comical *reductio ad absurdum* of the Law’s tendency to concentrate on outward behaviour at the expense of the disposition of the heart.

Jesus says it is truly a matter of life or death whether your heart is right with God or not – and no amount of cloaking the truth with outward religious observance will fool God.

By Jesus’ standards we all fall short. We all fail. This is why we need the salvation that Jesus alone offers the world. The Son who committed no sin and fulfilled the heart of the Law does not abolish the Law’s unattainable demands for purity of heart, but bids us aim for the stars, aided by the Holy Spirit Jesus sends to his followers, and comforted by the knowledge that when we fall short, Jesus’ forgiveness makes up for what we cannot do ourselves, provided we have the humility to admit it.

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