

Sermon Sexagesima/Ordinary Sunday 6 Year A 2023

One of the inescapable features of modern life is the all-pervasive presence of technology. Hang around some young people (and, oftentimes not so young people!) for any length of time and you will see their phone or some other electronic device not far from their nose. Current research is suggesting that too much technology, especially in the hands of the young, really serves as *a distraction*. Attention spans *are* shrinking. Many people today find it hard to apply themselves to a single task for any length of time. With so much clamouring for attention – emails to respond to, messages to be replied to, photos to upload, Facebook pages to update – people are constantly flitting their attention from one thing to another. Application to a sustained, detailed task or idea is becoming increasingly difficult for many people.

The great chunk from the Sermon on the Mount we heard proclaimed today may have us also looking for a distraction! We can point and wag our fingers at the young at their small attention spans, but when we are confronted with such a large body of teaching perhaps we too are left rather unsettled. We are used to much smaller, bite-sized portions. Which are good and helpful and useful. But sometimes it's also good to get the bigger picture. And I suspect the discomfort we feel is not just that we have to work hard to keep our focus. It is also that the very sayings demand much of us.

We have already heard several portions from the Sermon on the Mount over the last few weeks, and we will hear some more next week as well. What we hear today in part reflects a key issue in the early church. The gospel writer Matthew (more so than the other evangelists) shows the struggle between the early church and Judaism, as the two separate and ultimately go their different ways. One of the issues Matthew addresses in his Gospel is what is the relationship between the old covenant under the law and the new covenant under Christ. And so, what we hear today specifically addresses the accusation laid against the followers of Jesus that they were abandoning the law. So, the Gospel writer Matthew has Jesus say completely unambiguously, *'Do not imagine I have come to abolish the law and the prophets. I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them.'*

For the faithful Jew 2000 years ago, the people one might expect to be *best* at observing the Law and the Prophets were (and as we are reminded today) the scribes and the Pharisees. They paid their debts, observed their religious rituals, were leaders in their communities, and were fastidious observers of the minutiae of their faith. Despite their later bad press, the Pharisees originated as a holiness movement. Yet we hear Jesus telling us: “*Unless your holiness surpasses that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of God.*” Evidently, being a strict follower of the *rules* isn’t good enough. Jesus expects us to be *better* than just followers of rules.

In Jesus’ mind being right with God is not a question of simply observing the Commandments; it is not a question of what I must *do* to observe the law. It is a question of *what’s in our hearts and minds* that matters, and how that *aligns* with our outer life. The goodness of the Pharisees was superficial; they only kept up appearances. And just because we might appear to be good on the outside doesn’t necessarily mean that we are good on the inside. We may never commit adultery, but our hearts can be filled with lust. We may never be convicted of theft, but we can rob someone of their value in the eyes of others. We may never murder, but we can prevent others from reaching fullness of life. We may not steal, but we can cheat and so take from others what is rightfully theirs.

The more exacting demands Jesus makes is so that there is no dissonance between our outer lives and our inner lives. For Jesus, to be good means that we must not only not kill people, but we must also not want to do away with them in our hearts. To be good means we not only should avoid lusting after others and not commit adultery, but we must also not want to use other people simply for our own pleasure and personal gain. External observance is the easy part. And how we fail even in that! What Jesus is challenging us to is to a life where our words and actions reflect what is going on inside of us.

Now there is a tension here. On the one hand, there is the extreme observance of externals exemplified by the scribes and Pharisees. And people in the church, people of sincere faith, are not immune to this extreme. So, we need to

remember how Our Lord says it is not enough. Our righteousness *must exceed* the external observances. But then there is the other extreme which says, all that matters is the heart. 'It's what's inside that counts.' Again, not unknown within the church! It must be said this approach is now more the rule than the exception. 'None of the externals matter.' But this equally misses the point.

The great chunk of Scripture placed before us today really just reminds us that doing the minimum is not enough. Obedience to the minimum requirements of the law is not enough. And a fastidious observance of laws and rules – of themselves - will only stifle us, and lead us – ultimately - to madness. Jesus who comes not to abolish the law but to fulfil it realises this. The goal here is simply to reclaim the *heart* of the Law. It was the genius of Christ to realise that at the heart of the law was not a code of moral exactitude. *At the heart of the law is love.* The heart of law is Truth. The heart of the law is life. The genius of Christ is to reveal that the law is not about a fastidious observance of externals. Rather the law is, if we allow it, something that will help us be more real, more genuine, more authentic. In other words, more truly human. We live in a culture which tells us observance of law only stifles and restricts us, will only deprive us. Christ shows us in fact the complete reverse is true.

Observing the externals of religion, well that's easy! Turn up and pay up, that is the easy part of religion. To follow a set of rules, even a set of rules as useful and helpful as the 10 commandments (for instance), well, that too is the easy part of religion. Turning over the heart, turning over the mind, turning over our attitudes, well, that's the hard part of religion. Again, this is not to say we reject the externals. This is not to say they have no part. They do! But as Jesus reminds us, they cannot be all there is. It is because the Pharisees did stop with the externals that make them the target of Jesus' fierce critique. But Jesus wants so much more for his followers. He wants his people to realise the rich and beautiful life that comes when we allow our words and actions to be in harmony. Jesus wants us to realise that obedience to God's holy law – in hearts, mind and body – is the path to life. Amen.