

Concerning... (Matthew 5.21-37)

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So, (after hearing that) hands up all the squeaky clean. Hand up if you've not transgressed in one of the areas Jesus speaks about here – never been angry, or lusted, never caused a crack in a relationship or gone back on your word?

The first thing that came to me as I read this passage was a story from John's gospel (ch 8) where a woman, caught in adultery, is dragged before Jesus. The people are ready to stone her (as the Law commanded) and Jesus says: '*Let the one without sin cast the first stone*'. After saying that, Jesus bent down and drew in the dust, and while he was doing so the members of the angry lynch mob started drifting away beginning with the elders. When it comes to relationships and living together, who of us has not transgressed??

Yes, we may manage to avoid murdering someone or committing actual adultery or divorce, but who of us has not been offside with someone and insulted them, or felt lust or broken a precious relationship? Even when we're careful, things can become fraught. Person A says something (perhaps quite innocently) and person B doesn't like it. They complain to persons C, D and E and that gets back to person A, and now they're upset. What happens next???

As a friend of mine once said, 'Relationships are messy.' They are, they're so important, so necessary, but also tricky and sometimes downright difficult. '*I can't live with or without you*,' sings Bono from U2, and ain't that the truth!! So, in our passage, some warning and wisdom from Jesus.

Now, what strikes me about the issues he touches on is that in each case he takes us beneath the external behaviour (the prescribed prohibition) to the

root that feeds these breakdowns in relationship. To be sure, external sanctions preserve a measure of security in communal life. If everyone went around murdering or committing adultery and divorcing whenever they felt like it, society would spiral into chaos. Rules are important, but for relationships really to function well, we need also to address the underlying issues that make these legal restrictions necessary. You disciples, he's saying, don't just avoid murder and think that'll sort things (to use the first example). You need to be more radical than that; to work actively for reconciliation. And to do that, you must address your anger and the desire to 'kill' people off with insults, put downs, gossip and so forth. In fact, beneath the anger, psychology reveals, there are other matters to address – feelings of insignificance, helplessness, shame, anxiety, inadequacy and so on.

Jesus wants disciples to prioritise the deep work of reconciliation. In fact, here he places it above the act of worship. Or more accurately, sees it as fundamental to *true* worship. *'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.'*

I find this one of the most challenging directives in scripture. What do you do with this command? Do you ignore it because it's just so hard? Feel guilty because you have unresolved relationships and you haven't been able to bring yourself to sort them? Or because you've *tried* sorting things and the other person isn't interested? It's tough. Like I said, relationships are messy... complex! We've all failed, things go wrong; and I imagine we all carry the disappointment and pain of at least some broken or strained relationships.

What to do with this? If we took this command literally, we'd have the church doors choked with offerings and no one inside!!

But what if, rather than taking it literally, we were to take this command seriously? And it seems to me that that would require, in the first instance, that we reflect on and be honest about the state of our relations. 'When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you *remember* that your brother or sister has something against you...' It suggests that we are thinking about our relationships – reflecting over the manner of our living, letting ourselves become aware of how things are – and then attending to them. If I've said or done something to upset or offend someone, I can ask myself what I could do to forward a process of reconciliation. If it's an overwhelming difficulty and hurt, then it may not be obvious what I can 'do' – and maybe, at this point, my continuing prayer and honest admission of things, is the necessary work – 'the work before the work'. And maybe this is part of the 'gift' we leave at the altar – our perplexity or exasperation, our sadness and sense of failure or overwhelm about the state of things... poverty of spirit, a contrite heart. *Come to me, you who are weary and carrying a heavy burden*, Jesus says a little later in this gospel; 'Come... and I will give you rest' (11.28).

And if we are being honest about the state of our relationships, *and* about the state of our own heart, this takes us back to the radical root of reconciliation. If we're feeling hurt and angry and vengeful, then we need to own it, confess it, and deal with it. What's it saying to us and what can we appropriately do with it, irrespective of what is happening with the alienated person? Take the anger, for example (as Jesus does). Anger is a natural emotion, a normal reaction to certain situations. There's nothing wrong with

anger per se, but problems *always* arise if we don't address it faithfully, if we don't acknowledge and find helpful ways to respond.

And the same goes for the prohibition concerning adultery. Once again, Jesus takes us beneath legal requirements to the underlying matter of lust. His directive here is radical, to say the least. *'If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away... if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off.'* Well, again, this is an overwhelming command if we take it literally, which I note most of us don't!! The point is, we are being encouraged to engage with things at the root, to take *seriously* what we can easily excuse and dismiss. We are not to use one another merely to gratify selfish insecurity and desire – to gaze upon or consume people as objects. And (as his words concerning divorce make clear) nor are we to *discard* others when it's no longer convenient or they don't suit us anymore.

Having said that, I acknowledge that divorce is a complex and painful issue – it touches many of us and can leave big scars. In the time of Jesus, it was only the husband who could activate divorce and this almost always left the woman in a precarious position – poor, ostracised and isolated. Jesus speaks strongly against this, against taking marriage lightly, but when in our day these words are themselves used further to beat up, condemn and reject those who have been (or are going through) the gut-rending experience of divorce, then haven't we missed the point? Beneath the sanction, Jesus is encouraging disciples to attend to underlying issues in marriage and familial relationships, to the deepening of patience, care, love and integrity. Yet when, for a host of complex reasons, marriages break down and people are hurting and vulnerable, let's all seek to deepen our patience, love and integrity.

The final instruction in this passage concerns oaths and bearing false witness. There were (and are) clear sanctions in Jewish Law about this, just as there are in modern codes. And again, Jesus goes beneath the literal command. He's concerned with the trustworthiness of our word as the foundation of secure relationship and meaningful communication. Don't exaggerate, don't fudge, don't use words to manipulate or imply commitments you don't intend to keep – 'we really must catch up for coffee'; 'let me know what I can do to help'. Keep it simple and keep your word; be honest, let your 'yes' be yes and your 'no' be no.

So ... hands up the squeaky clean!! But actually, that's not the point. In the end, this isn't about who's righteous and who's failed. Jesus puts before us a vision of radical reconciliation and integrity, which is a foundation for real human flourishing and maturity. It's a call to get real and grow up – not a stick with which to beat ourselves and others, but a radical vote of confidence in the possibility of our becoming, delivered by the One who comes with love and grace to make us whole.