

The 6th Sunday of Year A: True morality and its reward.

1st Reading: Ecclesiasticus 15:16-21: we can choose, and opt for the good;

2nd Reading: 1 Cor 2:6-10: God's 'wisdom' differs from the world's;

Gospel: Matt 5:17-37: bad behaviour: anger / unchastity / breaking oaths.

This weekend, the Church has readings that continue last week's difficult topic of how we should (or should not) behave. At their centre is the Sermon on the Mount – a block of Jesus' moral teaching, given early in his ministry. Being on that hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee was his equivalent of Moses teaching the Jews on Mount Sinai, 1,250 years earlier. However, Jesus had a deeper element in his teaching. Moses had given a set of rules, which were added to enormously by scribes and lawyers as the centuries went on; Jesus also gave rules, but included attitudes of mind on which they were meant to be based.

Let's start with the first reading. It is from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiasticus (or 'Sirach'), so you'll need either an RC Bible or a post-1970 missal. (This book is not in most non-RC Bibles.) It was written about 200 BC for Jews in Egypt; the writer has a strong moral tone, and sees keeping the traditional rules as "wisdom" – God's gift to us of good living. In this Sunday's section, he stresses that we have free will, but also that what we choose to do does have consequences: "If you wish, you can keep the commandments; to behave faithfully is within your power.....Man has life and death before him; whichever he likes better will be given him." Having said that, he warns: "God's eyes are on those who fear him; he notes every action of man."

Many modern thinkers would not agree with this. The simple claim that we are totally free to obey rules has been questioned by psychiatrists for the past 100+ years. It ignores the way we are brought up, and the effect of dysfunctional families on children's ability to make moral choices. On the other hand, the law insists that at some point adults must be held responsible for their actions, otherwise society would be in chaos, and we could not justify jailing criminals who had had a bad upbringing. Furthermore, many modern theologians do not like the idea of God as a sort of secret policemen – "God notes every action of man". Much modern theology stresses that God forgives and loves: he is not a divine patrol-officer who catches those breaking the law. The problem is: can we have endless forgiveness without a measure of justice for those hurt by others' sins? Is human nature 100% good, or partly flawed?

Sorry to leave you in the lurch here! It is a question that will not go away, and I suspect that there are no easy answers.

If we turn to the gospel, Jesus gives a very different approach. I am assuming that the shorter version will be used. (The full version is VERY long!) Jesus' point is summed up in the phrase: "If your virtue goes no deep than that of the scribes & Pharisees...." He sees that the huge number of simple rules (Moses' ten commandments multiplied many times by additions over the years) had led to the stress being simply on keeping the letter of the laws, without thinking of the moral ideas behind them.

He takes three examples. The first is *You must not kill*. For him, the best way to avoid the ultimate offence against someone's life is not to hate them in the first place. "Hate" is not a physical thing, like verbal insults, beatings or killings, but an attitude of mind whereby we view others with contempt and dislike; we have no interest in their welfare. That is the first stage on a journey that can end in murder, so we should avoid it altogether. His second is *You must not commit adultery*. We tend not to see this as the ultimate sexual sin (it has been superseded by rape and child-abuse), but in ancient family-based societies, it was THE threat to stability and welfare. Again, the best way of avoiding the worst sexual sins is not to engage in bad thoughts in the first place. This means avoiding lustful thoughts and looks, which are attitudes of mind that eventually lead to the bad actions. His third example is one that has little relevance today: *You must not break your oath, but must fulfil your oaths to the Lord*. We now confine swearing oaths to trials in court, but in the past, they were often used to stress the truth of a point in ordinary life. To avoid bad faith here, Jesus suggests we simply say 'yes' or 'no', whichever applies. Our attitude of mind should be that our word is our bond, with nothing else needed. I would suggest the word "swearing" may also apply to its common use today – bad language that involves God's name. It is often a nasty habit that we should try to stop.

I finish with St Paul. Aware that the Christian approach is very different from that of "the world", he offers comfort to those who may find this tension disturbing. Quoting bits from Isaiah & Jeremiah, he writes: "*The things that no eye has seen and no ear heard, things beyond the mind of man; all that God has prepared for those who love him...are what God has revealed to us through the Spirit.*" In tomes of doubt & worry, I find that reassuring. *Fr Jim Dunne*.