



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time-Year A-February 16th 2020

Readings: Ecclesiasticus 15: 15-20, Psalm 118, 1 Corinthians 2: 6-10, Matthew 5: 17-37

Last November I was privileged, courtesy of being the High Sherriff's chaplain this year, to preach at the 'Judges Service' in Truro Cathedral. One of the things that is obvious to anyone involved in the legal system is that there is a huge difference between that which is illegal and that which is simply immoral. For the former the state, acting on your behalf and those of your fellow citizens, may remove a man's liberty and incarcerate him for whatever period the judiciary, under law, sees fit. For the latter there may be domestic consequences but, as far as the state goes, there is no further action. The difference between those of us gathered in Truro Cathedral and those currently 'in jug' is that our sins are merely immoral and not illegal. Furthermore, our sins, for the most part, are either covert or known only by a small circle. Even in the most extraordinary cases justice is partial. So that a young man who robs a post office at gunpoint may serve ten years. A doctor who has ended the lives of ten thousand unborn children in her clinic retires with accolades from her professional peers, a hefty pension and the offer of a 'gong' for services to women's health.

In today's Gospel Jesus goes deeper than even the blindingly obvious discrepancies of human justice. He looks at the origins of our disorder.

He shines a light on the dark places of our motive and the breeding grounds of our distortion of judgement.

Those modernist theologians who seek to portray Jesus as an ‘anything goes’ cuddly rabbi have not come to grips with his teaching which is both rigorist and merciful. As so often, in pastoral affairs, one depends upon the other. Jesus is insistent on the full acceptance of the Divine Law.

There is no watering down of the strong brew of divine affection and guidance. But today He looks at the wellsprings of our malice, our error, our falling away.

He looks at the human heart.

Behind the road to war lies a pattern of hatred and distrust. Behind the conflicts of Man lie a demonization of the other. Killing is, for the most part, the end result of our ability to de-humanise the other person. For those who thought, at the end of campaigns of vicious dehumanising, that Jews were not people, there was no moral problem in gassing them. For those who traded in slaves, the knowledge that those creatures were simply animals or tools of labour enabled them to eat a hearty supper in civilised company while their ‘property’ suffered gross cruelties and indignity. For those who dehumanise the unborn – just a foetus – there is no problem in consigning them to mass destruction and its desirability an article of our society’s creed.

So Jesus warns us about the patterns of mental behaviour that degrade, dismiss and despise the other. It is, He says, the road to Hell.

Similarly, that other great minefield of the human psyche – sex.

Adultery seldom happens by accident. There is a mind-set. Not everybody who thinks adulterously goes out and does it – thank God. But there is danger in having a disposition, both social and personal, in which such thoughts are entertained. And that is the key word – entertained.

There will be very few human lives that have utterly avoided the temptations of the flesh. The problem is when we fail to dismiss them but rather invite them in to the sitting room of our mind, offer them a sherry

and fall into a discussion of their relative merits and demerits.

Entertaining temptation is the short road to ruin. So Jesus warns us. Go round with that disposition in your heart and it will corrupt you.

My old Spiritual Director used to say in such cases. ‘My son, it’s no good pretending that there aren’t a lot of beautiful women in the world. It is perfectly good to appreciate that beauty. Like a fine painting by Vermeer or a Caravaggio, you can appreciate it without having to own it or steal it or take it home. If you see a thing of beauty, acknowledge that reality, give thanks to God for it and move on. In its alarming and naive simplicity, I have found it to be a formula that works. We speak the truth, we dismiss the temptation. We are free.

In these teachings, Jesus is, in many respects, echoing the famous response of His Blessed Mother. In the Magnificat, the Song of Mary, she responds to Elizabeth’s confirmation of her vocation as Mother of the Lord. In the coming of Christ and the choosing of Mary she proclaims that God has ‘scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts’.

The actual wording is ‘He has scattered those who, in pride, put themselves above others, in the deepest thoughts of their hearts the seat of their intellect and will.’ Christ is coming to undo that hell-bound mind-set which is the root of sin, the engine of the Satanic – all that opposes God and keeps us out of Paradise. It is that serious.

In the Anglican Prayer Book there is a lovely translation of this line. It says simply: ‘He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts’. It is a recognition that to capture the imagination is all too often to capture the heart. That, of course, why the media is such a powerful tool for good or ill. But that is another sermon and another day. Today is for responding to Jesus’ call to guard the inner sanctum of the heart and understand the roots of our sinfulness and to learn, by long discipline and strong will, to be inhospitable to the importuning of the enemy.