

Epiphany 6 – 9am Wesley – 16<sup>th</sup> February 2014

Theme: “Dealing with broken relationships”

Readings: 1 Corinthians 3:1-9 ‘Divisions in the church’  
Matthew 5:21-37 ‘Difficult teaching by Jesus’

### Introduction

Just occasionally I think it would be nice to stay in bed all day and not have to face the world!! Ever have those sort of times in your life? Well I think I had one of those moments as I looked at the Gospel reading for today. Oh my goodness, how do I handle these difficult teachings of Jesus looking at some of the difficult issues of life – murder, adultery, divorce and oaths. It could have got worse if Jesus added love of money and gluttony onto the list!! Fortunately he didn’t do that – not at least here! However, Jesus is dealing with the deep sadness of broken relationships which destroy so much in life and faith and so the teaching is incredibly strong and in some ways almost appears un-Jesus like to our ears because it appears so harsh. The setting is the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus has called the disciples to be ‘salt’ and ‘light’ in the way they live. It follows directly after the section where Jesus says:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.” Matthew 5:17

What follows is further teaching by Jesus using the rabbinic style of teaching – ‘You have heard that it was said .....but I tell you ...’

This style is used four times by Jesus in the section we look at in Matthew’s Gospel today and twice more in the rest of chapter 5 not included in today’s reading. This pattern of teaching emphasizes a point and then goes on to give further teaching. Let us take a few minutes to look at particularly the Gospel with a brief glance at the Corinthian passage also.

### Matthew 5:21-37

There are four easily discernible and distinct sections here:

1. The piece about murder that Jesus adds to and makes it harder by talking about anger (vss 21-26)
2. Adultery, that is changed into simply lusting after a woman (vss 27-30)
3. Divorce and to that is added to re-marriage (vss31-32)
4. Oaths which Jesus turns into always telling the truth (vss33-37)

The first of Jesus’ teaching is not about murder but rather about our relationships with those around us. Jesus says be careful in the way you speak to and about those around you. The word ‘Raca’ literally means ‘empty-head’ and could be translated ‘air head’ or ‘nothing at home up top’. A derogatory term for another like ‘you fool’. Jesus says beware of these negative words and attitudes and if you are about to make a gift at the altar and realise that you have something against a brother/sister go and put it right. Sort it out and settle the matter rather than allowing it to go further and destroy your relationship. Easier said than done but good teaching for all of us. As we come to share in holy communion I’ll give some time for people to pray their own prayers for forgiveness today before we partake the bread and the wine.

The second teaching of Jesus is about adultery and he changes it to the sexualising of the way you look at another person. In this instance it is a man towards a woman,

lusting after her. This is no passing glance but a wilful, calculated stare that arouses sexual desire. Jesus then takes the punishment to the extreme, talking about gouging out an eye or cutting off a hand. Is this Jesus using pictorial language or for real? A question debated over the millennia of time. For me it is like Jesus' parables, pushing home a point by the horrific imagery.

The third teaching of Jesus in this passage is about divorce which is even harder for us to understand today. We need to remember that Jesus is talking from his time and culture at this point. In Jewish society a male could say to his wife, 'I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you' and his wife was thrown out of the family home and onto the street. If she had no family to look after her she was homeless and lived on the streets at the mercy of all others which often led to a horrendous life. Jesus was trying to correct an injustice against women here. But for me there is a real struggle in this section. When is a marriage relationship broken down irrevocably? When is it time to call it quits in an abusive relationship? Do we advocate taking away the possibility of happiness through a re-marriage? Is Jesus again pushing the boundaries so we look more closely at our relationships and in particular our marriage relationship and not throw it away too easily? Certainly this is a challenge for our society today. I don't have any easy answers here and Jesus' teaching is quite confronting in our day and age.

As an aside, in my first parish I was phoned early in the piece by an Anglican (then Church of England) colleague who said 'I've got a wedding for you – I can't do it'. A little perplexed I met the couple, who were in their early eighties, and in filling out the paperwork I found that there were five previous marriages, three had ended in death and two in divorce. Hence the request that I marry them as at that time it was against church law for my colleague to do so. When I suggested to them that it could be easier to 'live in sin', they were horrified and said a definite 'NO'. 'This is what we must do – get married in the sight of God.'

Not an easy passage for those being re-married but I see this as an occasion for couples to look again at themselves and their relationships and to work hard on them.

The fourth area is swearing oaths, which was a common practice back in Jesus' time. Much of these have gone 'out of fashion' with the legal community having legal contracts for most things today. But in Jesus' day you often signed a deal by swearing on a god's name or Yahweh's name. Jesus says that you/we are called to keep our word, our promise as a person of integrity and faith. The integrity of our word is still mightily important as Christians and should be a sign of our faithfulness in following Christ. It also keeps us in a right relationship with others.

Finally in the passage from 1 Corinthians 3:1-9 Paul reminds that early church community that we don't follow anyone except Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. So many divisions within the life of the church have occurred by NOT centring our faith around Jesus but rather allowing personalities to influence our thinking. We all have differing roles to play but together 'we are God's fellow workers'. Some of Jesus' teaching is straightforward, other parts are difficult. We are called to grapple with God's word for ourselves and ask for guidance when we are unsure. May the Holy Spirit guide our thinking and reflecting. Amen.