

Homily for The Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)(16/02/20)

It is quite common for commentators to look at the position of the Church in the world of today, at least the Western world, and conclude that people are more resistant to faith than ever before, more closed to the unseen world, more reluctant to put the value of the spiritual above the value of the material. No doubt on one level that is true, and it is certainly the case that Faith seems to have been marginalized in public life in recent years. But listen to what St Paul writes to the Corinthians:

'We have a wisdom to offer those who have reached maturity: not a philosophy of our age, it is true...'

Even as St Paul was writing, he could see that the wisdom of faith in Christ was not the wisdom of the world around. And although Christianity came to be first tolerated, then established as the dominant culture, the truth is that it is very hard to find at any stage in history a moment where the faith was lived out to the full, from the greatest to the least, and it truly looked as if the Kingdom of God was being made concrete.

Jesus himself is trying to break into this sense that religious faith sometimes doesn't deliver a change of heart – indeed sometimes it can mask a refusal to change – in today's Gospel. Again and again we hear:

'You have learnt how it was said...'

followed by

'but I say this to you...'

The Law by which the Jewish people lived was given to them to help them live differently to other nations, but too often they had used it to mask hearts that were the same as every other. In the Book of Deuteronomy God gives the people a solemn command, which is to be written on their hearts and taught to their children:

'you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.' (Dt 6.5)

So, the specific commands of the Law are given to the people to help them love God. Do you want to know what it means to love God? Read the commandments. But by the time of Jesus there was a powerful strand within Judaism that saw the commandments as an end in themselves: as long as you fulfil the commandments that's fine, you can do as you like. That is so much not the point. Jesus wants to help people understand this.

'You must not kill' says the Law. Well, most people don't kill, does that mean that all is well with my soul? No, it doesn't. You don't kill, but what about that quick temper that lashes out at the people closest to you; or the prejudice that you feel towards some group or other; or the anger that comes so easily when you are frustrated, or delayed, or crossed by someone? Jesus is saying to us in this passage that not killing, or not committing adultery, is a good start, but it is not the end. The fundamental command is to love God, and to accept his love for us; to live in easy and companionable friendship with him, to live as his disciple, as his follower, as his apprentice in the role of living well. That is the basic bottom line of the Law. Make your heart a suitable dwelling place for the heart of God, so that when heart speaks to heart it is a meeting of like with like. Now, if your heart is full of anger, even if that anger never expresses itself, never comes out even in words, let alone in actions, is that heart really a suitable place for God to rest, to abide, to take up residence?

So the wisdom of the Gospel is not a philosophy of this age, that is right. The wisdom of the Gospel tells us that, if we want to live a true, authentic and therefore happy and fulfilled life, outward appearances will not be enough. Keeping the commandments is a good thing, but only if it is a step on the road to a deeper holiness, a deeper dwelling in God's presence and resting in his arms.

We have still ten days before Lent begins. Perhaps it would be a good idea for us to give this some thought and some prayer in Lent: What are the areas of my life where, even if outwardly I appear to be good and virtuous, inside my heart is saying something else? Is my heart a good and ready and suitable place for God to make his home? Is there some anger there, some desire there, some dishonesty that I conceal with virtuous outward actions but which I know will never be at peace with the heart of Jesus?

The wisdom that we have to offer, which every age struggles to accept, is that a conflicted heart, a heart that conceals, a heart that allows passion and instinct to run riot unchecked, will never be a happy place for us, however much we control our outward actions. It is no good saying 'this is all harmless, because it never goes further than my heart, I let it burn out there but it never finds its way into my actions'. Really? Can we be so sure? And does that make our heart an admirable place, a fruitful and joy-filled one?

'He who wants to keep his garden tidy doesn't reserve a plot for weeds.'
Dag Hammarskjöld.