

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A) 12th February 2023

Today's Gospel continues the Sermon on the Mount. The words are very familiar, but it is worth stopping for a moment to read them carefully, because if we read them as if for the first time, we will see something quite shocking there.

First of all, Jesus says that he has not come to abolish the Law (no shock there, abolishing it would be quite something) – but he has come to complete it. He has come to complete the Law: so the Law which God the Father handed to Moses on Mount Sinai was incomplete! And here is this new preacher saying he is the one to complete it. That is quite a claim. Then he goes on to say, three times in today's reading 'You have learnt how it was said... but I say...' They have been told, for generation after generation, one thing, and he is telling them something else, something deeper, something more challenging. But, of course, what they were originally told came on the tablets of stone from the top of the mountain: He is saying, what you were given in the Ten Commandments was not enough, there must be more. If you stop and think about this for a while, it is really quite shocking. He is sitting there on that mountain telling the people that the commandments his Father gave Moses on another mountain did not go far enough. To say this is to make quite a claim about who he is. Who could vary the commandments of God? Only God himself, surely? In which case....

So, what is behind this New Law? He says to the people that their virtue must go deeper than that of the scribes and Pharisees. They must be people of 'deep virtue'. But what might that mean? What is deep virtue, and how might we find it? This is such an important question. Wouldn't you want to be surrounded by people of deep virtue? Wouldn't you want that in your political leaders, your husband or your wife, your children, your friends, your neighbours and work colleagues – your Parish Priest? What is it, and how can we find it?

The pattern of the three 'but I say' sayings today is that while the commandments are about actions, about what you must do or not do, deep virtue, the New Law, the command being given once for all time on this mountain, by this new Moses, is about conversion of the heart. OK, so I am really furious with you about something, but I manage not to kill you. In fact, I don't even hit you. That's a result isn't it? Well, it certainly fulfils the commandment, I can tick that box. But Jesus wants more. He wants more than just not killing you: as a moral precept, that is setting the bar quite low. He wants me not to be angry with you – not just to avoid shouting at you, but to let the anger go from my heart. That is because the New Law is a Law of Love, which means wanting what is best for another person (what is really best for them, not just what I think is best for them) and that cannot coexist with anger. Yes, we sometimes get angry with people that we love, but the anger blocks the fruit of the love, and so in the world of deep virtue it has to go. So does the lust, however secret it may be; and so does the untrustworthiness, the lack of trust, that makes us insist on an oath. In the world of deep virtue, it all has to go.

This is picked up, too, by St Paul in the second reading. He talks about a wisdom for all ages as opposed to a philosophy for our age. In St Paul's mind this world of deep virtue, this New Law of Love, is for all eternity. It worked in the past, it works now, and it will work for ever. He contrasts

it with 'a philosophy of our age'. Such a philosophy is a poor sort of thing. It might seem exciting and new and innovative, and so on the surface it might be appealing for a while to come up with new ideas, it is so very new and so very modern, so very progressive. But, of course, a philosophy for our age is just that – a philosophy for our age. Tomorrow, when the new age comes, it will be old and tired and hopeless and we will need something new. St Pauls says, don't get tricked into settling for a philosophy for our age, it is a sham. Stick with the New Law of Love instead, a word for all ages, the source of Deep Virtue.

Let me just finish with a quotation I heard yesterday, listening to Bishop Robert Barron speaking in London. He quoted St Camillus, who said: 'Commitment is doing what you said you would do, after the feeling you said it in has passed'. Yes, Lord, the world is bright and good, I feel as though I am on top of it, everything seems very clear and good and true and easy, I can hear your voice so clearly yes I will do x and y and z.....and then the emotion subsides and the feeling fades and it becomes clear how hard this might be; and yet, because it was the right thing to say, I will carry it through. That is commitment; that is so much not a philosophy of this age (it couldn't be further from it); but it is also deep virtue, it is conversion of the heart, not just of the external actions. It is the New Way that Jesus called his disciples to on the mountain top, the way that he then went on to demonstrate by his living and by his dying.