

SERMON: 16 February 2020 – Rev Alistair Cowper

"Choosing to love - Your word is enough"

(Deuteronomy 30:15-20 and Matthew 5:21-37)

Today's reading from Jesus' sermon on the mount struck a completely new note of authority in the ears of those who heard it. Jesus spoke with authority and his listeners were amazed at what he said.

In his teaching about anger, adultery, divorce and making vows he offers what were totally revolutionary ideas to that which had been in the past. He is urging in a new culture - the liberating and grace-filled kingdom of God.

Jesus is calling people, and continues to call people, to embrace a new way of being in the world.

Every time we encounter him in his Word we are invited to yield to this new authority and let go into this new way of being.

This is good news from the Lord.

In today's word, Jesus is challenging those who think that its only one's actions that matter. When we think that only our actions matter, and the attitude or desire or motivation or mind set behind the action doesn't, then we resort to untamed animal behaviour.

But we are not wild animals. We bear the image of the Divine. We're not just flesh. We're flesh and spirit.

Actions matter. So do thoughts. Jesus says its so.

In Jesus' kingdom, merely to think about being angry towards someone is as bad as committing murder.

And if you're in a committed relationship with someone else then merely to look lustfully at someone else is as bad as committing adultery with them.

Faithfulness is a matter for the heart in Jesus' kingdom.

And pretending to cover up one's motivation or desire by adding religious language to a promise is no excuse.

Let your yes be yes and your no be no.
Jesus is concerned with the state of people's hearts.

He knows that it is 'out of the heart come evil thoughts--murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander' (Matthew 15:19).

Jesus knows it's the heart that defiles a person. As the Canadian pastor, Oswald Smith once put it, 'the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart'.

But Jesus didn't come simply to point out the human problem. He comes to us to be our solution. He comes to bring a new humanity.

In his life and death he embodied a new way of being in God. He brought that new way of being into our world.

And that's why we're here today. That's why we need to be here.

That we might take on this new way of being in the world; that doesn't give in to the old ways of animal being in the flesh; that turns our backs on the ways

of anger, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, gossip and slander.

In Christ, God is calling us to come up higher and to come further in. He's urging us and empowering us - from within and from without - to live out his ways - and by so doing, to see his presence and his kingdom come into all things.

And of course this cannot take place without a death and resurrection; without our surrendering our old ways and embracing the new.

So that, with Paul, we might say in our hearts, "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

That's the good news. That is where true liberation is found and real life begins. Herein lies our hope and the hope of all humankind.

HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

So when it comes to anger, we are not to even desire to feel angry towards another person. And if we find ourselves angry with someone else we have to sort it immediately.

We are to drop all things, even our worship of God, and go and be made right with the one we are angry with.

I'm wondering if there will be a few people here today thinking they should perhaps quietly slip out and deal with some un-dealt with business with

someone they've been angry with? I might need to search my own heart and come and join you too.

You can see why Jesus reckons on reconciliation being so important in God's kingdom. Because if we let bitterness take root, it will fester and spoil and rot and it will be very hard to repair the damage later on.

So let's get right with our fellow humans. Let's be prepared to lose face and back down in order to quench the fire of division among us.

And what about Jesus' words on marriage, divorce and adultery.

Jesus was speaking into a specific situation which prevailed at the time. Marriage was not considered as solemn an undertaking as it is today.

Divorce was too easy. Women did not have equal rights in marriage. In Jesus' time, girls didn't want to get married because marriage was too insecure. Women were treated as the property of a husband and could be divorced on if the husband was unhappy with the way she prepared his food for example.

Men could marry without any commitment of the heart. Love often never came into it. The whole structure of family life was at the point of collapse in Jesus' time.

Long gone was the concept of faithful, committed oneness that the Book of Genesis spoke about, exemplified 'when a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one' (2:24).

Jesus uses this same Scripture in Matthew 19 when he's questioned by the Pharisees as to whether or not a man is allowed to divorce his wife for any reason.

His answer states that divorce was never God's intention and that faithfulness is what matters but that marriage isn't for everyone. There are reasons why people don't marry.

Please notice that Jesus is not condemning divorce. There is no condemnation for those who have been divorced. And if there is any shame sticking to those who have gone through a divorce then the Lord works to heal that shame.

Remember the context Jesus is speaking in was one where divorce was just too easy - the law of Moses had been interpreted in such a way that a husband simply needed to read a letter of divorce to his wife in the presence of two witnesses and that was it.

The Bible is actually fairly quiet on the subject of marriage and I'm not sure that in recent years in the church the subject has been handled as cautiously as it could have been.

Besides when Jesus is asked about marriage he replies by saying that in the age to come (or at the resurrection) people will neither marry nor be given in marriage. In other words marriage is not an eternal matter. It is temporal - 'til death do we part.

Which leads us on to vows. What does Jesus say on the taking of vows.

I wonder, in thinking about vows, is Jesus thinking of Jephthah's vow here - one of the most disturbing stories from the OT Book of Judges chapter 11?

Judges 11:30-35: Jephthah made a vow to the Lord. He said, "If you give me victory over the Ammonites, ³¹ I will give to the Lord whatever comes out of my house to meet me when I return in triumph. I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering."

³² So Jephthah led his army against the Ammonites, and the Lord gave him victory.

³⁴ When Jephthah returned home to Mizpah, his daughter came out to meet him, playing on a tambourine and dancing for joy. She was his one and only child; he had no other sons or daughters. ³⁵ When he saw her, he tore his clothes in anguish. "Oh, my daughter!" he cried out. "You have completely destroyed me! You've brought disaster on me! For I have made a vow to the Lord, and I cannot take it back."

The Lord never asked Jephthah to sacrifice anything to him and certainly not his own flesh and blood.

Why would Jephthah do such a thing? Was it to prove to others how holy he was? Was it a genuine misunderstanding of what his God was like and what his God would demand?

It might have been both these reasons or neither.

But both reasons point to common human problems - pride and misunderstanding the divine.

Jesus comes to deal with both and show us a better way by enabling us to rise to the new standards he sets before us.

What would he have said to Jephthah?

'Listen Jephthah, I'm with you always, you don't need to prove it to other people; don't put your religiosity before your own family; don't sacrifice your own flesh and blood on the altar of your own pride'.

I wonder if there is a word here for us today, in our often misunderstanding of what it means to serve God.

Have we separated what we think to be holy from everything else? Have we created a divide that doesn't really exist? When in reality all things are holy, everything is spiritual, the divine presence is in all things; Christ is all and is in all.

And on that basis, let us choose to say a simple yes to love.

Thank you God that you are the source and fountain of love, the great love through which all love flows. May we ever live in the flow of your constant love as it washes us, encourages us and sets our feet on higher ways in the kingdom of your everlasting light.