

Proper 2 Year A

Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 15:15-20

Psalm 119:1-8

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Matthew 5:21-37

Two themes: (1) why are Paul and Jesus cross? (2) what about anger?

Paul is cross. Jesus is cross. Jesus is talking to people who are criticizing others for not upholding regulations, as if that was the only thing that mattered. His message is that we must obey the spirit of the law, and not just the letter of the law.

We use this in ways that suit us. We use it to say that, for example, never mind what the jobsworths say, we can bend rules 'this time'. Never mind what the law says about speeding, I know someone who will get me off the hook. It's a terrible shame that Mrs O'Reilly was knocked down on Saturday night, but 'the poor auld driver had drink taken'. So that's OK then. 'I know what the rules say but it's much easier for everyone if we sidestep them just this once. It's the compassionate thing to do. It's what Jesus would have done. Isn't it?'

Apparently not. Jesus is far more demanding than this.

He says we are to obey the spirit of the law, and *not just* the letter of the law. To obey the spirit is *more* demanding than simply to obey the law, not less. It's no good obeying the letter of the law unless our inner motives are right, too. It's hypocritical to criticize someone else's adulterous behaviour when you yourself 'fancy' someone else's wife or husband, even if you don't act on it. It's no good criticizing someone else's divorce if you yourself have at some time or other wished you were divorced. And that business about not swearing is not about using the b word or the f word—that's trivial stuff. It's about not swearing an oath on the Lord's name.

What Our Lord is getting at here is 'what's going on in your thoughts?'

Every act of evil begins as a thought, and it's those thoughts that Jesus is getting us to look at.

Every act that deliberately harms someone else begins as a thought in your head that belittles them. You are saying that they are less important than you. When you want to cut someone at a road junction, you're assuming that they and theirs are less important than you and yours. When you push into a queue, you're assuming that you are more important than everyone else in the queue. When you insist that your opinion wins over other people's, you are assuming that you are more important than other people.

We may not commit adultery, or rape, or maim, but all of us at some stage think we are more important than everyone else. We have all said things that belittle others, even if not to their faces. When you start to think that you are more important than anyone else, whether at traffic lights, or in a queue, or whatever, then concentration camps and ethnic cleansing are just around the corner.

What it boils down to is NOBODY should be criticizing someone else's adultery, or divorce, or whatever, since NOBODY is free from impure thoughts. Jesus' point is simply that we need to acknowledge that we are all in the same boat. Not one of us is free of these pernicious ways of thinking. 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.'

Now anger. I said at the beginning that Paul and Jesus were both angry. They are angry because people are doing exactly this: 'I'm better than you are.' Paul and Jesus shout 'no you're not!'

There is a mistaken view that Christians should not be cross, and should not be angry. I hear this at school: pupils told they should be calm and compliant and do as they're told. This is absolute bunkum. They should ALWAYS be angry about injustice. Christians should ALWAYS be angry about the ways in which other people are exploited. A Christian's duty is always to witness to the truth. And this means that anger is absolutely necessary. The question is, what sort of anger, and how do we deal with it?

Anger is hard-wired into the brain. We need it, or used to, for survival. Suppressing it, however socially acceptable, is bad for the organism. Suppressing anger can lead to heart disease, to cancer, to psychiatric disease. Some people get rid of it by thumping, some by other physical activity with less likelihood of arrest.

What can the pastor advise about dealing with anger? I spent a good bit of time with a 12 year old lad who had an abusive father. He knew the fate that awaited him for having lost some trivial item. He was beside himself. I said 'I know how you're feeling.' And he – to his great credit – said 'no you don't, how can you? you're not me'. That taught me a thing or two. Saying 'Jesus understands' is likely to result in your admission to A & E. Getting people to talk about it is an absolute must. To scream and shout, to curse until there is no more energy left. To sink into *apathy*.

Apathy. A useful state, however painful it is to arrive there. A lack of emotion. *All passion spent*. No longer are you foolish enough to expect others to imagine how their decisions might affect you. From apathy you begin to pick up again, knowing better what you're dealing with. Maybe you become intent on revenge. They say it's a dish best served cold. The trouble is that seeking revenge makes you hard-hearted and bitter as it eats away like cancer. It is cancer of the spirit. But it's easy to understand why stories about revenge – *Shawshank Redemption* – are popular.

What we need to do is to distinguish between anger on behalf of others, and anger on behalf of *self*, that is, injured pride.

Are you angry on behalf of someone else? That's good anger. What are going to do about it?

Are you angry because you have been belittled and your pride injured? Then think of how you may have belittled others. Resolve to change your ways, to let your 'yes' be 'yes' and your 'no' be 'no', despite the duplicity and thoughtlessness of others.

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