



16 February 2014
Septuagesima
Sung Eucharist
1 Corinthians 3 vv. 1–9
Matthew 5 vv. 21–37

But I say unto you
Restoring Relationships
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'You have heard it said...but I say unto you'

Matthew 5 vv. 21-37

May the words of my mouth and the reflections of all our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus provides a series of contrasts between traditional Jewish law, '*you have heard it said*' and more radical demands: '*but I say unto you*'. In each case the contrast is one of depth, between external conformity to law and internal transformation of the heart.

Laws serve a useful purpose, they seek to protect the community and individuals by setting rules to be obeyed, but Jesus's teaching goes much deeper into our desires and motivations. Murder and adultery end relationships and destroy communities, but they are rooted, says Jesus, in anger and lust and indeed in jealousy and envy. So we must actively seek reconciliation and resolution rather than passively wait for law to take effect and assume it will solve all our problems within society.

Law cannot exist or function effectively without an underpinning of trust. This deep truth has recently been rediscovered afresh by the General Synod of the Church of England in the last six months. Having exhausted itself with internal conflict and overly-detailed legal solutions to the question of how those opposed to women bishops can continue to thrive in the Church of England, the Synod has moved on very significantly indeed with simple legislation and a remarkably peaceful process, to date. So on Tuesday, we swept through five separate debates to take forward various parts of the legal jigsaw required to move forwards well inside the time required. What has made this possible has been a continued focus by the bishops on three simple guiding values - mutuality, reciprocity and simplicity, or as we might say in this chapel '*love of the brethren*', a deep loving commitment to our brothers and sisters.

Jesus words which take us beyond the law remind us not just of individual piety (that we should restrain from lust and cut out from our lives those things which led and support such behaviours, so that we do not put ourselves in the way of temptation), but also of our relationships with others and the transformation of unjust structures for the good of the whole community.

Which leads me to mention one other debate at the General Synod last Monday, which resonates with today's focus on anger and lust and touches on a very difficult, uncomfortable, often invisible area of human life, namely physical and sexual violence against women and girls, and domestic abuse. I am deeply conscious that in raising the issue there may well be some present today who have been subjected to such abuse and perhaps some who have found themselves perpetrating it. It is endemic in certain parts of the world especially in conflict zones, but it is also widespread within our own society, and occurs in all sorts of different contexts and households including Christian, churchgoing households. So, for example, in the UK one in four women will be a victim of domestic abuse at some point in her life; 80,000 women are raped each year; and two women per week are killed by a partner or a former partner.

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One way in which we can be faithful to today's gospel imperative, is to acknowledge this reality, to understand that we as a Church and as individuals have a duty to provide support for those whose lives are scarred by such violence, to understand the debilitating combination of a sense of shame, stigma and silence that it so often entails for victims. To understand that we also have a duty to bring perpetrators to account AND help them to work to change. And that we should do all that we can to tackle the attitudes and behaviour that lie beneath or precede it. Ninety percent of such violence is inflicted by men against women and so part of the motion at General Synod last Monday particularly sought to address that directly by asking men and boys to face this reality and take an active stand against gender-based violence rather than a passive or indeed a dismissive one.

As the Church of England seeks to move forward and celebrate women in leadership roles, as Bishops, one practical step that men might take as part of their deepening Christian discipleship and their response to Jesus's words in the fifth chapter of Matthew, is to join with others in taking a pledge, endorsed by the General Synod this week, and found on a website run by the charity Restoredⁱ - called First Man Standing:

I pledge never to commit, condone, or remain silent about men's violence against women in all its forms.

In the name of Almighty God, *who alone can bring order to the unruly wills and passions of sinful humanity*, women and men.

Amen

ⁱ <http://www.restoredrelationships.org>



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