

6th Sunday of the Year - 2011

Like all the Jews of his time Jesus inherited a very detailed and all embracing set of religious rules. There were a variety of ways of interpreting them and putting them into practice and today, Jesus shows that he is the completion and fulfilment of all those laws. He is the one who makes sense of them and in doing so offers humanity the way to life and fulfilment.

Before I go too far, I would like to say a word about Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce in this particular Gospel. He quotes the Law of Moses which said that a man could divorce a woman for inappropriate sexual conduct and he goes further forbidding all divorce. It is important to put his

teaching into context because it is clear that he is talking about his society's attitude to women. Some of his male contemporaries believed that while a woman could be divorced for sexual impropriety she could also be divorced if she burnt a man's dinner. It is also important to remember that the man had these rights and more over the woman who had no rights and no process of redress or appeal. It does not surprise us to see that Jesus was telling his audience that they were not to treat women as objects. Rather they were to be treated with respect which was very unsettling news to the culture of his time. Jesus was putting the issue of marital breakdown and the dreadful difficulties that surround it into a new context of respect, forgiveness, gentleness and gratitude. It was not

just a question of keeping this or that law because Jesus was inviting people to adopt a whole new style of living.

I am trying to illustrate the fact that Jesus brings a new and challenging way of living. It is not just a question of keeping the rules, which is what the people of Jesus' time thought. It goes further than that. The rules and regulations stand at the end or the beginning of a whole new way of regarding and respecting people.

I started to wonder as I was writing this homily, what Jesus might have to say about the money each of us may have, or have had, in our bank accounts or investment plans. As the Lord's disciples we have kept the rules. The money in our account is ours because we have worked for

it, inherited it or been given it. It has not been accrued dishonestly so everything is fine. Because it is our own honestly acquired wealth we can use it just how we like. It's as easy as that because we have kept the rules: you must not steal; you must not defraud; you must not exploit and so on.

But is it as simple as that? Could it be that we live in a society that makes it possible to accrue money in our accounts because somewhere or other, as a society, we are depriving the poor in another country? Could it ever be true that our wealth is the result of another's poverty? We need to reflect before we make a quick denial and say "of course not."

Then there is the issue of spending our money on what we like? Or the attitude which says “it is mine and I can use it to enhance my own pleasure in life. There is no rule against that, or is there? In the light of the Gospel, is it true that we can spend our money on what we like? Is there not a responsibility on us to see that what we buy has been justly produced; to see that we are not falling into the trap of excessive accumulation of unnecessary goods; to consider that some of the money we possess might be given to those in need?

Each of us is filled with the Spirit of God who leads and guides us to life. All we have to do is to allow the Spirit of Christ to guide all our actions and thoughts. In that way we become the time and place

where the risen Christ can work for our good and the good of all.

In his teaching today Jesus touches on all those drives within us that are the source of our emotions decisions and actions. Those drives or energies which are such a vital part of ourselves are to be used guided by the law of love and modelled on that love.

Jesus speaks of that drive deep within ourselves which we can describe as anger. It is often ignited or brought to the surface by another person or event outside ourselves. The way we express that angry energy must depend on our being guided by the law of love rather than a spontaneous outburst which can do so much damage.

The same is true of those desires within us which Jesus calls lust. Jesus is referring to the wise and loving use of sexual power but the spirit of his message is that all our desires must be shaped and expressed guided by Christ's message of love and the Holy Spirit dwelling within us who is a power for good within us if respond to him in truth and prayer.

Jesus finishes by speaking about oaths. In Jesus' time these were used in the market place, as a way of testifying that God was a witness to the honesty of a trader or individual. Jesus is saying that there should be no need for oaths. Every word should be inspired by our love for God and one another and therefore there should be no need for oaths. Jesus requires that

his followers mean what they say
and say what they mean.

Living as we do in a world of almost
infinite choice for this or that,
today's Gospel message is both
challenging and crucial.

Challenging because it says that we
may not choose to do exactly what
we like in every area of life. Crucial
because the way to life and
flourishing is by allowing our lives
and the responses and choices we
make to be guided by the word of
Jesus and inspired by the Spirit of
God.