

you have heard that it was said...

a sermon preached on the

third sunday before lent

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at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Sirach 15:15-20; Ps 119:1-8; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-27

No doubt the precepts of the Law were a huge breakthrough at the time of their being given. As we all know, laws are only made because humans act in ways which the community feels the need to constrain. The ancient Hebrew permission of 'an eye for an eye'¹ was in fact revolutionary, because it *limited* retribution, which had previously been disproportionate. This was also the case in relation to the offering of children as sacrifices to appease God's wrath; and in relation to the way in which wives were treated. No doubt the same is true for all the other laws.

In many respects, Jesus' 'sermon on the mount' is very much a restatement of the Hebrew law and prophetic teaching – which in itself bears significant resemblance to the great moral, ethical and spiritual breakthrough which took place simultaneously in all the great religious traditions, during that period which has been called the 'axial age'.² As many have observed, Jesus' summation of the law is simply another way of stating what is known as 'the golden rule' – 'doing to others as we would have them do to us'.³

Everyone is able to acknowledge the importance, the necessity, of the law. Ethical and moral life depends upon it. All religious traditions sit their children down and teach these moral ethical codes. We can all agree that this is an essential foundation for civil society. And all of us are confronted with how to respond to law; to choose, as Sirach expresses it, "between fire and water".⁴ 'Blessed' indeed are those who walk in the way of the Lord.⁵

Today we will baptise Tommy. He will no doubt be blessed by his parents and extended family, by being taught these moral-ethical foundations. However, as we heard a couple of Sundays ago – in his revolutionary teaching about what is the true meaning of 'blessed' – Jesus' sermon takes his followers way beyond mere law, invites disciples to transcend the mere basics of foundational ethical and moral principles. "I did not come to abolish the law", Jesus tells those legalistic literalistic-minded critics lurking in every crowd, "but to *fulfil* the law".⁶ The law is not fulfilled by the mere observance of external rules and regulations. I am not truly a follower of Jesus simply because I have obeyed social norms and practices. Being baptised into Christ's death and resurrection is a calling of radical transformation.

In the gospel readings for today and next Sunday we hear Jesus repeat six times: "You have heard that it was said... but I say to you..."⁷ In each, Jesus begins with the commonly-accepted moral-ethical code. He affirms it; but makes it very clear that this is not enough. Not enough, it is crucial to distinguish, in order to be disciple, follower, member of his Body.

And notice what Jesus does. He transcends the external visible domain, inviting the disciple to another level altogether, the level that cannot be 'photographed', cannot be worn as a badge of honour or proof of accomplishment. "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; but I say to you that if you are *angry* with a brother or sister..."

In spatial terms, where is this anger located? Likewise, where is the 'adultery' located? Where is the 'divorce' located? Where is the 'oath' located? Jesus the wisdom teacher's astounding spiritual breakthrough is his insight as to where all these things are located. Inside! It's an *inner* reality, an energy within the human heart and psyche. Anticipating modern psychology by nearly two millennia, Jesus 'discovers' the fundamental principles of the structure of the human psyche. Not content with mere external rules and regulations – since he has obviously worked out that just keeping laws does not ensure peace, justice, equity, and reconciliation – Jesus has made the great discovery that it's 'not what goes into a person that's the problem, but what comes out from the inside that what makes 'unclean'.⁸

¹ Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, Deuteronomy 19:21

² Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions*, New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2006.

³ Matthew 7:12

⁴ Sirach 15:15-16

⁵ Psalm 119:1

⁶ Matthew 5:17

⁷ Matthew 5:21,27, 31,33,38,43

⁸ Mark 7:19

Jesus has no doubt observed in the religious people of his day that it is perfectly possible for people to *appear* to be good citizens, yet interiorly ‘full of dead men’s’ bones’.⁹ He is indeed a great wisdom teacher. People are astounded at what he teaches, exclaiming “Where did this man get all this?”¹⁰

The gospel’s answer is that he himself went *inside*, there to discover that everything the law talks about is in inner reality within himself, which has to be confronted, with which he must wrestle.¹¹ Later, his apostle Paul expanded on this when he observed that those who merely keep rules and regulations are still infants, quarrelling and in rivalry.¹²

Jesus had to be confronted with his own inner anger – resentment, adultery, misuse of the name of God, and so on – in order to truly become son of God. This is a far more difficult work than the mere keeping of external rules and regulations.

This is the great spiritual undertaking which leads to true union with God, to becoming truly sons and daughters of God. This is Tommy’s true vocation, what it means for all of us to be baptised into Christ’s death and resurrection: starting out with the basics, learning the foundations, then going into the depths of our own being, plunging into the hidden places of the heart, transcending mere law, becoming indeed the ‘mystery that is laid on the Altar’,¹³ Christ’s body.

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⁹ Matthew 23:27
¹⁰ Matthew 13:56
¹¹ Matthew 4:1-11
¹² 1 Corinthians 3:1-4
¹³ St Augustine