

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

GOSPEL

Jesus said to his disciples: 'Do not imagine that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete them. I tell you solemnly, till heaven and earth disappear, not one dot, not one little stroke, shall disappear from the Law until its purpose is achieved. Therefore, the man who infringes even one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be considered the least in the kingdom of heaven; but the man who keeps them and teaches them will be considered great in the kingdom of heaven.'

'For I tell you, if your virtue goes no deeper than that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven.'

'You have learnt how it was said to our ancestors: You must not kill; and if anyone does kill he must answer for it before the court. But I say this to you: anyone who is angry with his brother will answer for it before the court; if a man calls his brother "Fool" he will answer for it before the Sanhedrin; and if a man calls him "Renegade" he will answer for it in hell fire. So then, if you are bringing your offering to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, go and be reconciled with your brother first, and then come back and present your offering. Come to terms with your opponent in good time while you are still on the way to the court with him, or he may hand you over to the judge and the judge to the officer, and you will be thrown into prison. I tell you solemnly, you will not get out till you have paid the last penny.'

'You have learnt how it was said: You must not commit adultery. But I say this to you: if a man looks at a woman lustfully, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye should cause you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; for it will do you less harm to lose one part of you than to have your whole body thrown into hell. And if your right hand should cause you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; for it will do you less harm to lose one part of you than to have your whole body go to hell.'

'It has also been said: Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a writ of dismissal. But I say this to you: everyone who divorces his wife, except for the case of fornication, makes her an adulteress; and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.'

'Again, you have learnt how it was said to our ancestors: You must not break your oath, but must fulfil your oaths to the Lord. But I say this to you: do not swear at all, either by heaven, since that is God's throne; or by the earth, since that is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, since that is the city of the great king. Do not swear by your own head either, since you cannot turn a single hair white or black. All you need say is "Yes" if you mean yes, "No" if you mean no; anything more than this comes from the evil one.'

(Matthew 5:17-37)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- Two of the major divisions of the Jewish Scriptures are the Law (comprising the first five books of the Old Testament, the Hebrew *Torah*) and the Prophets (*nebi'im* in Hebrew). The other major division is known as the Writings (*ketubim* in Hebrew) and comprises the Wisdom literature of Israel, including such books as the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job and Ruth.
- The Pharisees were a group of very pious Jews who observed all the laws of Israel. They are often depicted in the gospels as overly legalistic or even hypocritical, but this is probably an unfair depiction that has been influenced by the events surrounding the separation of the early Christians from the mainstream Jewish religion after the destruction of the temple in AD 70.
- The origin of the term *scribes* is unclear and seems to cover a variety of functions and bureaucratic officers. The term does not seem to denote a group with particular religious beliefs but, rather, learned men more generally. During the time of Jesus, they were probably influential in the temple and at various levels of government.

EXPLORING THE WORD

The central theme of this week's reading from Matthew is built upon for the next several weeks. In this text, Matthew is reassuring his Jewish audience that Jesus has not come to replace the Law of Judaism but to bring it to fullness and completion. In this gospel, Jesus reassures his hearers that 'not one dot, one little stroke, shall disappear from the Law.' Instead, Jesus extends the Law of Israel and interprets it in a new way. His emphasis is on the spirit of the Law, not the letter of the Law. Doing only what the Law requires as a minimum is, for Jesus, not enough. Disciples are called to discern what is at the heart of faith and to bring this to all our dealings with people. The observance of outward expressions of faith is hollow unless it is accompanied by an attitude that shapes our whole being and informs all our actions, responses and decisions.

- Discuss why laws are necessary for the best ordering of societies.
- Think of some examples of actions that may be 'legal' but are not necessarily 'moral'.
- Contrast and discuss the 'spirit of the law' and the 'letter of the law'.
- Explore how Christianity is an attitude that shapes the whole being and life of a believer.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- How easy or difficult is it to live an honest and ethical life?
- Have you ever said 'yes' when you really wanted to say 'no'? Have you ever felt obliged to say 'no' when you really wanted to say 'yes'? How did you feel about not being completely honest in your response? Share your reflections.
- This week, be honest and open in your dealings with all the people you encounter. Go further than the basic requirement of good manners.
- Today's entrance antiphon makes a suitable prayer for this week. Repeat it often:

*Be my protector, O God,
a mighty stronghold to save me.
For you are my rock, my stronghold!
Lead me, guide me, for the sake of your name.*

SHARING THE TRADITION

A closer look at the Scripture of the day, to see how it makes more explicit God's word to us through the teachings of Jesus Christ

All organisations need to have rules that govern their functioning. The Catholic Church is regulated and governed by what is known as canon law. This originated in the first centuries of Christianity and was based largely on Roman law. Over the years, it came to be cumbersome and confusing. There was a call from bishops to codify and simplify the laws governing the Church. This was acted upon at the first Vatican Council (1869), and Pope Pius IX ordered work to begin on producing a single document. This came into force in 1918. Pope John XXIII again ordered a revision of the Code of Canon Law and a commission was established in 1963 to carry out this work. The new code came into force in 1983 and governs all aspects of the functioning of the Catholic Church using the Latin Rite.

- You could briefly introduce the areas covered by canon law, such as the functioning of a parish.
- The Church does have a number of requirements that

must be fulfilled by the faithful, such as participating in Sunday Eucharist, receiving the sacrament of reconciliation once a year and so on. Outline and discuss these requirements for catechumens.

- Go beyond the minimal requirements of regulations to discuss how disciples should live every day.
- Canon law governs the Catholic Church using the Roman Rite. You could introduce the catechumens to the fact there are different rites associated with the Catholic Church. These include some Eastern and Byzantine rites such as those used by the Maronites, the Ukrainian Catholic Church and the Russian Catholic Church.

SYMBOLS AND IMAGES

In this text, Jesus addresses what is truly required to honour God appropriately. God does not require hollow praise and exultation but, rather, that we have pure hearts and honest dealings with all people. Jesus emphasises the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law.

LIVING THE WORD

Practical ideas for group leaders to employ in connecting Scripture and daily life, with suggestions for music and environment

- In what ways is your community governed by laws that regulate its function? In what ways does your community go beyond the minimal requirements and live discipleship fully in the broader community?
- Use the open Scriptures as a focus for prayer. Reflect on how the spirit of the Gospel guides all our lives. Pray for open hearts and a complete understanding of 'living faith' for each other. Use the prayer of exorcism in the RCIA at §93C. A suitable song might be 'A new heart for a new world' (GA 438).

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