

FR HUGH'S HOMILY FOR 6th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

During the Last Supper Jesus lifts up his cup of wine and says, in Matthew, this is the blood of the covenant. In Luke, of the new covenant. But what does this mean, this new covenant in our daily lives? Here in the gospel today Jesus begins to explain, to give some examples. He is not saying that the old is out, but he is building upon it and going deeper.

What I am saying to you now, Jesus says, is that the rules, the guidelines for being a follower of mine are built on the old ones, but you might find these even harder.' So, let's see what he is saying, and there are significant words and phrases that help us with this.

In the first paragraph what is the key word here? 'Righteousness.' Righteousness is a quality of God. It is a justness, a balance, a harmony, and a goodness, in all things that comes from God and holds creation together. So we need to be righteous, he is saying. This is what his instructions are about, to help us. But because this is a quality of God it is going to need more from us than before. To be adult believers. To use our consciences. Asking ourselves: 'What does it mean to me, in my life?'

Look at the paragraph on murder. Yes, murder is still wrong. But it is not only that act of it, it is what is in our hearts that now counts. Jesus is being extreme to get his point across, but the key phrases here are, 'First be reconciled to your brother.' Then, 'Come to terms quickly with your accuser.' Seeking harmony. Those listening to Jesus knew that their courts were notoriously corrupt and bribing the judge was the way to win (which most of them could not afford) so it makes sense to come to terms with your accuser. However, it is more than that, it is seeing your accuser as your brother. This is what he is asking of them now. This is a key to restoring righteousness and behaving righteously.

What about the adultery paragraph? There is plenty in this. Firstly, what Jesus dwells on is the treatment of people of the other sex (women here). How we look at another, how we reduce people to objects for our pleasure with no aspect of love or equality. There is so much that is true to our society today in this. We will not achieve the balance of righteousness when there is no equality in our own relationships.

But the next bit is the passage I like best. Chop off the offending limb, pluck out the offending eye. I am not going to ask us all to do that just now and the church might end up being a bit of a mess and I worry for the cleaners. What Jesus is getting at is this. For the Jews holiness depended to a great deal on us being bodily and mentally whole. Any blemishes meant we could not approach God in the Temple. Jesus is saying, 'I don't care what you look like, it is what is in your heart that is important.' So again, this is a massive bit of exaggeration for effect. 'Cut off what does the offending and be un-whole and banned from the Temple, rather than be unholy in your hearts where it matters to me.' (In Lent we often try metaphorically to cut out some things.)

Again, with the paragraph on divorce, his language is extreme, but what he is asking of us is to work to find that harmony again. (Practically we know that as humans we cannot always achieve this.)

All of this gospel is about seeking the righteousness of God. Living as Jesus calls us to live. Seeking that wholeness and integrity in our lives at one with each other and creation and God.

But for this he asks a lot. Renewal of our hearts.