

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Homily by Fr. Dan Donovan (Feb. 16, 2014)

The gospel reading at Sunday Mass throughout much of this year is taken from the **gospel of Matthew**. It is the **most Jewish** of the Gospels. Written some 50 years after the death of Jesus, it comes out of and speaks to a predominantly Jewish Christian community that is struggling, on the one hand, with fellow Jews who have not accepted Jesus as the Messiah and, on the other, with the dawning realization that the future of the gospel and, with it, the future of the church is going to reside primarily in the **non-Jewish or Gentile world**.

Matthew insists on the Jewish roots of Jesus and on the fact that in him many of the great themes as well as hopes and promises of the Old Testament find their fulfillment. In this regard, today's reading contains a key affirmation, an affirmation found only in Matthew: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the prophets," Jesus says. "I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."

If, over the centuries, some Christians have dwelt on the differences between the Old and the New Testaments, Matthew emphasizes the continuity that exists between them. He sees almost every aspect of the life and ministry, as well as the death and resurrection, of Jesus as fulfilling some incident or saying, some teaching or prophecy, in one or other of the books of the Old Testament. For Matthew Jesus also fulfills, in the sense of bringing to perfection, the moral or ethical teaching of the Mosaic Law. More than the other evangelists, Matthew underlines and develops this aspect of the teaching of Jesus. Although Jesus proclaims the good news of God's gracious will in regard to human salvation, he also insists on the importance of conversion and faith and a way of life patterned on his teaching and example.

Today's reading contains **three of six sayings** of Jesus all structured in the same way. "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times... But I say to you...." In spite of what this way of speaking might seem to suggest, Jesus is not rejecting what was said in the past; he both affirms and radicalizes it; he makes it not less, but more demanding.

If the **10 Commandments** as a whole focus on external actions like avoiding murder or physical violence, Jesus urges us to guard against feelings and emotions which, if harboured and nurtured, will lead to such actions. And so, if in the past we were told not to murder, he encourages us not to be angry at or insult others or call them names. In the second of the sayings in today's gospel, he declares that we should avoid not only adultery but even looking at another person with lust and fostering and dwelling on our desire for them.

The emphasis in the moral teaching of Jesus is on the heart, on our innermost feelings and passions, on the world of intention. Feelings as such come and go and cannot easily be controlled. What we can do, however, is not dwell on them, not feed and foster them.

We live in a world in which the electronic and other media tend in a variety of ways to manipulate us, to undermine us in our integrity and honesty, our capacity for kindness and generosity, our fidelity to one another and to our commitments. We need consciously to react against such negative influences, whatever their origin. One way is simply not to look at or listen to certain things. Another is to put time and energy into positive things, things that build up ourselves, our family and others.

Today's reading is part of Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount, the first of the five great sermons or discourses in which he brings together much of the teaching of Jesus.

As a kind of new Moses, Jesus reaffirms the teaching of the commandments and then goes on to challenge us to live them in a more profound way. Later in the gospel, Matthew will say that the Law and the prophets are summed up in the Golden Rule – do to others what you would have them do to you – or, in another passage, in the twofold commandment of love of God and love of neighbour.

Today's first reading, taken from the Old Testament book of Sirach, emphasizes the **importance of choice**. "The Lord has placed before you fire and water; stretch out your hand for whichever you choose," the Sirach declares. "Before each person are life and death, good and evil; whichever one chooses that shall be given."

The life of each of us, although influenced by a variety of factors, is very much the **result of the choices** which we make in the course of it. Some of our choices are more important than others – choices about education and profession, marriage and the family, friends and work. Equally important, however, are choices that have to be made again and again in the course of one's life, choices about morality and faith, about honesty and fidelity, about the relative value of things like money and pleasure, family and friends. As in the case of the Mosaic Law, Jesus does not abolish the need to make choices but fulfills it by giving it an even wider scope including the choice of accepting and living according to God's own self-giving love.