

Homily for 1st Friday in Lent
March 6, 2020

The central theme of the Sermon on the Mount is stated by Jesus when in Matthew 5 he states:

“I have not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfill them”.

What did Jesus mean by this? For the Jewish people of Jesus’ time there were three different sets of Laws. Liturgical, ceremonial and moral. Jesus was not referring to the liturgical and ceremonial laws; rather it was the moral law he came to fulfill

Where is moral law most fully articulated in the Old Testament? It is in the Ten Commandments.

When we look at the Ten Commandments, which are the essence and the foundation of all moral law, we can see that their whole meaning can be summed up in one word—“respect”, or even better, reverence. Reverence for God and for the name of God, reverence for the Lord’s day, respect for parents, respect for life, respect for property, respect for personality, respect for the truth and for another person’s good name, respect for oneself so that wrong desires may never overpower us—these are the fundamental principles behind the Ten Commandments, principles of reverence for God, and respect for our neighbours and for ourselves.¹

Now with this in mind think again of Jesus’ teaching we heard today. He refers to of the commandment pertaining to how we are to respect others, under the themes of

1. Murder/Anger.

He takes commandment numbers 5, “You shall not murder” gets to the very essence of its meaning. One way to approach today’s teaching is by asking the question: “Do I respect the human dignity of the other person?”

Human dignity is the principle whereby we treat others with the honour that is their due because they are made in the image of God. It requires speaking in ways that build up relationships and curtailing speech that diminishes the value of the other person. When we allow anger to take root in our lives, the casualty is the loss of reverence of and dignity for the other person.

Listen to the precision of Jesus’ words:

But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be liable to the hell of fire.

¹ Barclay, W. (2001). The Gospel of Matthew (Third Ed., p. 151). Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press.

Notice the movement of these words from interior attitude to outward contempt. It is in three steps:

Step 1: The fault of feeling angry

Step 2: The fault of passing an insulting remark

Step 3: The fault of irrational anger.

Is it wrong to experience anger? Well no. St. Paul in Ephesians 4 tells us: “Be angry but do not sin”.² The problem Jesus highlights is that so often our anger does lead us to sin. The interior attitude leads to insult which in turn leads to irrational rage.

The word translated as “insults” in the language Jesus spoke, Aramaic, is the word “*raca*”. It is not an easy word to translate. It means “foolish, stupid, crazy”. The Jews used it to indicate utter contempt; often, instead of verbal abuse they would show their feelings by spitting on the ground³.

The word that is then translated as “you fool” is even more intense and indicates that the person has been entirely written off and deemed worthless.

Jesus teaches something so important here. If we harbour anger it will become so explosive we will find ourselves in the hell of fire; that is the time of eternal punishment. This shows the gravity of external sins against charity—gossip, backbiting, calumny etc. However, we should remember that these sins stem from the heart; our Lord focusses our attention, first, on internal sins—resentment, hatred etc.—to make us realize that that is where the root lies and that it is important to nip anger in the bud and so respect human dignity.⁴

How prevalent this kind of anger is today and we can make it so impersonal. So often dialogue threads online are filled with vitriol and the kind of insulting words and dismissive attitudes Jesus warns us against.

What about in the home, at work, at school and wherever people gather. If you allow Jesus’ words to examine your heart, are you guilty of the kind of anger that has diminished the human dignity of another person?

How destructive this kind of anger can be! Dearly beloved we all have to examine the role anger plays in our lives and when we know we have violated the reverence due to another person, admit that we have committed a mortal sin and as soon as possible go to confession.

² Ephesians 4:26

³ Saint Matthew’s Gospel. (2005). (p. 53). Dublin; New York: Four Courts Press; Scepter Publishers.

⁴ Saint Matthew’s Gospel. (2005). (p. 53). Dublin; New York: Four Courts Press; Scepter Publishers.

For some of us anger has perhaps so gripped our hearts that we also need the wisdom of a spiritual director and or counsellor.