

But I say to you...

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

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One of the interesting things in my life is that I have studied Ethics three times, and I have quite enjoyed the experience. What has struck me in all this is that it was noticeably different each time. The first was at WEC College, where we were doing some support studies for our lay ministry in about 1984, the second in Africa in 1988 and the third time in about 1993 as part of my B Th. Perhaps the greatest difference that we discussed was the distinctive nature of marriage. Whereas in the west, we were hung up with the rightness/wrongness of Divorce and Remarriage, in Ghana, the essential ethical question about marriage was whether it was acceptable to have more than one wife – (i.e. how should the church deal with Polygamy).

In as much as Ethics was about finding right and wrong, it seems that it has a significant situational flavour. Of course, there is the theory that ethics is totally situational. For example, is infanticide always wrong?

There is a story from the American West. In the 18th century travelling along the Boone Trail was extremely hazardous. Often the travellers were faced with large parties of Indians, and they would hide to avoid confrontation and certain death. Consider the following two situations which took place:

- a) A Scottish woman saw that her suckling baby, ill and crying, was betraying her and her other three children and the whole company to the Indians. But she clung to her child, and they were caught and killed.
- b) A Negro woman, seeing how her crying baby endangered another trail party, killed it with her own hands to keep silent and reach the fort and safety.

The question is, “Which woman made the right decision?”

This is the classic situational ethic scenario. And it falls back to a number of other theories of ethics – Greatest Good and Least Harm... Love is the guiding principle. But it has its drawbacks. If the situation can only determine the rightness or wrongness, then there are, by definition, no absolutes. This leads to the supposition, by definition, that there is no God.

Now it is not wrong to seek to find the right solution, and indeed this is what legislators are attempting to achieve. Laws have been designed to determine right from wrong since the ten commandments, but herein lies the problem. Human nature not only sees the laws as a challenge to be taken up, and there is a strong tendency to find ways to bend the laws to suit. Often we will justify our own behaviours in this way. Well, it never really hurt anyone!, or it's OK because we love each other etc....

Morality or Ethics based on legalism is seen to fail. Hence why Jesus challenged the righteousness of the Pharisees (the best law keepers of his time) as being not sufficient for heaven. In today's Gospel, Jesus begins to explain why.

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with

a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

"Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times A rule to be obeyed... But Jesus makes it personal – But I say to you... and then he challenges the attitude that leads to the transgression. We are not to be just people who do not break these laws externally. We, you and I are to be changed into people who are Christ-like. This is such an important state to reach, that we must be prepared to pay the cost:

If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right-hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

You see that doing right and wrong has nothing to do with being a Christian. This is not something that we can do on our own, but it will come about when we allow the Holy Spirit to show us our failings and teach us to deal with them. Only when that inward change is rendered will we be able to enter the kingdom, be worthy of the name Christian.

Now I know that we are not a perfect Christian community and that we have our moments as a community. I can do little about this, but to offer you this challenge. Let us take a few moments to consider just the last month prayerfully. In the stillness of this place – ask the Holy Spirit to prompt you about those times in which you have failed to live out the attitude of Christ. Don't try and justify them, but rather seek God's forgiveness for this, especially as we join in the general confession.

Let us now spend some time with our own thoughts...

AMEN