

## A Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

Today's Gospel passage is an interesting text. As is usual with most Biblical texts, if not all of them, it requires interpretation for us to be able to learn the most from it, and to benefit from it most significantly.

The passage opens with Jesus teaching us about the power of language. Jesus warns us to be careful even in our thoughts towards others, saying that "if you say, 'You fool', you will be liable to the hell of fire". We are going to be held accountable not only for our actions, but also for our words, and even, for our thoughts. The expectation placed upon us is exceptionally high. This is one of those moments when I wonder, if this is the standard we are to aim for, then who on earth can meet it? I am certain that we have all said something much stronger than "you fool" about someone else, let alone merely thought such a thing, and not apologised for it. So ... what can be done? How ought we to try to live?

With these words, Jesus is attempting to teach us a valuable lesson. What we think affects us. When we are filled with unkind thoughts and judgemental thoughts about others, we are affected. We become negative and damage ourselves with such hostility. It is far better for us to try and be kind in thought as well as words and actions. To try and think the best of people and to give them all the benefits we are able, even in our unspoken thoughts.

Then Jesus put it into a lived example. We need to approach the altar with a clean conscience and as pure a heart as possible. In Jesus example, the one going to make their offertory at the altar remembers an incident with someone else, and goes straight away to be reconciled.

From this we learn that reconciliation is to be our priority. We should not seek to be fully reconciled with God when we have an outstanding issue with someone else. We need to do what we can to repair whatever needs to be repaired, and then continue. In theological terms, reconciliation means that we are willing to talk, to hear how we may have hurt or harmed someone else, to apologise and accept the consequences for our wrongdoing, and genuinely pursue a better future. It is not about making the past actions go away, but to demonstrate that they will not be perpetuated.

Similarly, Jesus commends mediation to us when there is a problem. People talking problems through is an important step in making sure we live in a functional community. We should talk about small problems before they grow bigger and become real stumbling blocks in our relationships. Conversation and mediation are so important in making this happen, though there is a caveat – some things need to be adjudicated by the law, and we should seek full and proper justice when it is needed. But, initially, we should try and mediate problems before they grow larger, when possible.

So my hope for us all, is that we will be careful with our thoughts, words, and our actions. That we will consider the emotions and sentiments from which we act, and that we will be as generous and kind in our thinking, as much as we guard our words and actions. I also hope that we will seek to be reconciled when it is necessary, and be willing to forgive as well as ask for forgiveness. Both actions require quantities of courage, grace and patience.

And if you're feeling that this is a difficult lesson to live up to, I understand. It is hard. The Christian faith is not always an easy journey, but it is worth it. And we have guidance along the way. He have Jesus to look to, as one who embodies love, compassion and mercy, but who also spoke truths that needed to be heard, and whose lessons could be used to great benefit.

In the first letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes to the Church and its people. He wishes to encourage them to grow in faith and maturity, and identifies that they have a long way to go (which is probably true of all of us, until the very moment when we are called into God's presence at the end of our lives). He says, "I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food." And there is nothing wrong with milk - it nourishes, helps people grow, and contains many good things for the human body. So let us draw nourishment from this milk, in anticipation of finally receiving solid food.

Paul counsels the people of Corinth to work together, and to see themselves as equal in the service of God. He reminds them that we have a united purpose, being "God's servants, working together". May we too see the many things which bring us together as a human community, rather than focus on divisions and difference. May we see the possibilities when we use our efforts, our energy and our abilities in a united manner, and may we credit God with the growth and grace we see as a result, while also rejoicing in all that we are able to achieve with a common purpose.

And given that yesterday was Valentine's Day, here's a little saintly history for you to conclude my sermon. The tradition of a Valentine's Day card is a long-established one, but they did not begin as a romantic gesture. Back in the mid-to-late 200s, when St Valentine was imprisoned in Rome for being a Christian, he chose to write to other Christians and Christian communities to encourage and support them. He signed these uplifting letters, "Your Valentine". So let be a similar type of Valentine - let us support others, encourage them, help them and cheer them on. Your words might be just what they need to hear, and buoy them up.

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