

A couple of weeks ago we heard the gospel of the Beatitudes. This was the beginning of a long sermon by Jesus – the Sermon on the Mount. In it, he gives a lot of instructions about how to live a happy and blessed life and to be part of God’s kingdom. We heard some of it last week and we hear it again this week. As we listen to his teaching, it is important to remember that he is encouraging the people to live happy and fulfilled lives.

In Jesus’ day, the religious leaders were placing burdens on people and making demands that many considered to be not just unreasonable but also not properly faithful to the Law and the Prophets. Elsewhere in the gospel we will hear Jesus criticise these leaders and call them hypocrites. God had given the Law as way for the people to be unburdened and free, but the leaders had turned it into a burden. This is why Jesus says that he has not come to abolish the Law and the prophets, but to complete them. He wants people to return to a proper understanding of the Law and the prophets.

This is where we need to look closely at what he says. In today’s gospel there were four sayings that help us understand the link between commandments and the choices we make about our lives. In each of these sayings, Jesus began, “You have learnt how it was said ...”, and then he went on, “but I say to you”. This indicates that he wants the people to go deeper in their living out of each commandment. Let’s recall the first example. Jesus stated the commandment that you must not kill, then he pushed the meaning of this commandment by referring to being angry with your neighbour. Similarly, with the commandment not to commit adultery, he pushes this to include a man looking at a woman lustfully.

I imagine that the people listening to Jesus would have been shocked as they heard him. He was pushing them to think in a totally different way about keeping the commandments. It is not sufficient to think of the commandments simply as a code of right conduct. Rather, he wants them to hear the commandments as sources of wisdom for living. When commandments are simply considered as a code, they become not much more than a way to keep out of trouble. They may even degenerate into a cover for what is ultimately bad conduct. In Jesus’ day, this seems to have been common, and the religious leaders were being asked to make judgements about certain actions to determine whether they did or did not contravene a particular commandment. This is what Jesus was talking about when he brought anger into the discussion

of murder. Murder is obvious, and it destroys a community. But anger can destroy a community just as much as murder would. It is the same with his example of adultery. Adultery is obvious and it has devastating consequences on a married relationship. But behaviours that subtly undermine a relationship are just as dangerous and perhaps more dangerous. We could expand the examples to include anything that forms part of God's law.

People often ask if such and such an action is a sin. This is a good question to ask because it shows that they are thinking not just about the action named in a commandment, but also about what types of action might fall under that commandment. The question also shows that it is not as simple to give an answer as we might often like. If we are thinking simply in terms of a code that lists what is right and wrong, then the answer is usually simple. However, if we are thinking the way Jesus asked people to think, then the answer is found by paying attention to our heart. But not in the sense that I can do whatever I like, or that I can be swept along by the crowd. The paying attention to the heart that Jesus is referring to is to recognise the God-given capacity we have to do good. It is to feel God's calling us to be the best version of ourselves that we can be. That best version will not be self-focused, but rather look outward to God and also to others.

In this way, to grow in spiritual maturity is to examine all our activity in terms of relationships – with God, with other individuals and with the community. When the quality of those relationships is important to us, then we will have moved from seeing the commandments simply as a code of right and wrong, to hearing them as words of wisdom for our times. We then experience them as God's invitation to a more mature life and a more fulfilled life.