

Today, and for the next 4 or 5 weeks, we hear from Jesus as series of corrections or intensifications of the received divine law. "You have heard it said" becomes the familiar refrain, with the additional "But I say to you", and with this second part Jesus seems to push the demands of the law to impossible levels. Today anger and slander are equated with murder, resulting in liability "to the hell of fire". Even if someone has something against me, I am responsible for dealing with it: "Come to terms with your accuser quickly..." With these intensifications of the meaning of the old commandments Jesus gives shape to the "better righteousness" which exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees (5.17-20). And, just so, he makes it effectively impossible to make the grade.

Here we see that happy denials of Jesus as a divine person and affirmations of his status as a moral teacher run aground, for surely the teacher is wholly unrealistic. And because of the apparent lack of reality in what Jesus says here, our natural response is to argue the point. We scramble for qualifications and caveats to soften the harshness of the teaching; surely there are times when we are rightly angry, when fools are rightly enlightened as to their true character?

In our attempts to debate with Jesus here and in the texts we'll meet in the weeks to come we demonstrate that we hear him in a starkly *moralist* way. That is, we separate Jesus' teaching from Jesus himself, as if our faith in Jesus is something which is actually quite separate from the actions which are required of us. On the one hand we believe in Jesus, and on the other he makes demands of us, and we discover these two things to be in conflict, for the actions or attitudes he seems to require of us are too much. It's here that we moralise Jesus' teaching, for we end up believing *both* that he asks too much of us, and that it is yet incumbent upon us to meet these demands. In this encounter with Jesus we hear only *law* – only command, and nothing encouraging or liberating at all. Is not Jesus sitting here before us as a new Moses, delivering a new covenant from the mountain top? It seems as if meeting these demands is what is necessary in order to stand rightly before God. Our *moralising* of Jesus' teaching is in our tendency to hear his words as a *list* of things to do or not do. It is this "list" approach to the teachings of Jesus which turns most of what Jesus says into bad news, rather than good news. The character of the demands as bad news arises from the conflict

of these demands with other imperatives we feel.

Now, we can leave the analysis there, and either continue our argument with Jesus, or we can actually seek that higher moral standard which it seems Jesus demands. Alternatively, we can ask what would have to be the case for what Jesus says actually to be right, *and* to be a word of good news for us. How is it possible that we might find ourselves in a position to aspire to what Jesus commands, and possibly even achieve it, and for this to be a good thing for us and not a repressive thing?

In his reflections on the relationship between divine law and the gospel the German theologian Friedrich Gogarten draws a distinction between the divine demand and the divine demands. Prior to all the demands we hear from God, all the separate "but I say to you"s, there is the demand – or gift – of a direct relationship with God, what the New Testament calls the life as "son" or child of God. A person is a son or daughter by virtue of his or her very existence; this is not a thing which we can affect but which has been done "to" us. The "thou shalt"s are secondary to this prior identity; we don't stop being daughters and sons if we don't meet these demands.

It is this prior identity which sets us free *for* the things God might demand of us. The debates we have with God about what we might or might not do rightly arise from our conflicting identities – a son of this, a daughter of that. God's demands seem unreasonable to us because other demands seem more reasonable. If God's command not to be angry troubles us it is because we find constrained by *another* reason or command to *be* angry. We find a *reason* for anger, and this reason has to do with needs we feel must be met if we are ourselves to be whole. The way we respond to others reflects our sense of who we are and what we need, rightly or wrongly. It is here that Gogarten's distinction between the *one* divine demand and the *many* ethical demands is important. God demands of us first the relationship the New Testament calls "sonship"; but in fact this demand is fulfilled as a *gift* – God embraces us as children and so gives us what he demands.

This being the case, the many things Jesus piles up as seemingly impossible things to achieve lose their moral character. They are still important as ways of behaving, but they are no longer *necessary* for our right standing before God.

Being no longer necessary for such a standing, they are no longer cause for anxiety. In relation to our text for today, the focus then shifts from our interest in the one who upsets us to God's interest in us. How does God's interest in us affect our interest in ourselves, and so the way we respond to others? We know well-enough why it is we think those who make us angry *deserve* our anger or insult. But just as important in the whole dynamic is what I achieve for myself in my anger and insult, or think I achieve, and whether or not this accords with a confidence that God has embraced and established me as his child.

A few weeks ago I remarked that for the Christian sin is not so much a thing to be avoided as it is a thing which is *unnecessary*. We sin because we doubt the capacity of God to deliver on things we imagine we need. If we find it *unnecessary* to transgress it is because we no longer believe the transgression will advance our cause, or add to us. As far as today's reading goes, to insult another, to reduce them to nothing with some label, is to have perceived them somehow as a threat to me and my identity. I reduce another in order to build myself up, or to secure myself. We see just such a dynamic in such historical relations as between Nazis and Jews, Hutus and Tutsis, white and black, colonists and aborigines, in patriarchy and hierarchy.

We are free to be without anger when we have learned to be satisfied with what we are in Christ. This is not to suggest that there is no space for desiring more, for growth, for development and for aspiration. But these things now become not burdensome work but exploratory play. There is no anxiety, no fear, when we are loved; we are set free by the right of love to do the right.

The good news in these "but I say to you" texts we've met today and in the weeks to come is not that Jesus finally gives the law its fullest definition but the waxing brighter of the significance of the belief that we are "children of God". The possibility of not being angry and insulting arises not from our sheer effort in doing what Jesus says but from our identity as a son or daughter of God. We are loved and accepted as we are now and the ethical demand – or rather, my observance of that demand declares – declares that this is indeed the case: God, and I in God, is sufficient. I can give myself up, and still have myself in this God.

All of this gives a different twist to the second part of our reading this morning, which we've not noted until now.

5.23 NRSV So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against

you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

The one who "has something against you" is now revealed to be God, and it is with God that we negotiate "on the way to court". The only thing is that the point of the "negotiation" is simply that we accept God's terms of love and acceptance. Apart from these terms we have only the impossible demands of God's law and our failures at meeting it, and so we are lost and imprisoned, unable to pay what is owed.

Thanks be to God for this gift of life in him, and the freedom it brings. And by his grace may his people find themselves increasingly able to express their thanks in doing as he commands. Amen.

Afterword

A comment is necessary on the "anger" and "insult" Jesus displays in his ministry (Matthew 21.12ff and 23.1ff, and par.). here the anger of Jesus is one of advocacy, attacking those persons and practices which presume "Moses' seat" (23.2) but who "make the new convert twice as much a child of hell" as themselves. We might also note the rebukes of demons (Mark 1.23ff), the pity/anger (textual variants) in response to the leper's request (Mark 1.41), and the force of Jesus' rebuke of Peter at Caesarea Philippi. In those episodes there is no sense that Jesus is defending himself or establishing himself against others. The anger arises from an already secured identity which *motivates* his attacks but is not *changed or secured* by them, and this identity as "one for others" manifests itself in angry advocacy on behalf of those whose humanity is reduced by the powerful.