

If the teaching of last week's reading on the murderous insult seemed perhaps a little over the top, but still more or less acceptable, then this week's is more likely to find a few raw nerves. We are probably generally able to agree with Jesus' teaching on insults and abuse, but the challenge on sexual mores in today's text strikes a different chord with us. The teaching on divorce tends to edge in much more closely to us or to some we might be concerned about. We are likely to find in ourselves the desire to defend ourselves, or others we know who are divorced, or, in relation to Jesus' proposal about the significance of sexual lust, we might find in ourselves the desire to protect modern presumed freedoms in relation to sexual expression.

Our times are very different from those in which Jesus spoke on these matters. A significant aspect of his teaching here had to do with the protection of rights of women. Jewish women were susceptible to divorce for the most trivial of reasons, and this meant being subject to social and economic deprivation in a starkly patriarchal society. Jesus' prohibition of divorce, and even of the entertainment of the possibility of divorce in the adulterous leer is at the very least a defence of vulnerable women in that society. Yet, in such a time as ours, when women's rights and capacity to take care of themselves are much more on a par with the rights of men, does such teaching still apply?

Contemporary sexual mores are certainly very different from those which existed even 50 years ago, let alone 2000 years ago, and unpacking the differences and their significance is more than we can do today. I've spoken before on the matter of Jesus' prohibition of divorce and won't go into repeating all that again – some copies of that old sermon are available for collection after the service if you're interested! There is also the question as to how we evaluate the tradition of the church on human sexuality, which is complex and much mixed up with quite unchristian influences. This I will also set to one side this morning. Our starting point and focus today will simply be this: whatever freedoms or restrictions we might claim or impose on ourselves today as far as sexuality goes, most people, whether believers or not, will agree that sexual faithfulness is an important part of certain types of committed relationships. It will be enough work for this morning to unpack why it is that we might find ourselves acting unfaithfully, or wanting to be unfaithful while in such committed relationships, in the way that Jesus describes.

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A simple moral approach to unfaithfulness in our relationships imagines that it is about being naughty or weak. These elements or deficiencies of character may indeed be present. But more important than the merely moral evaluation is looking to the *cause* of the transgression in the first place. Here we begin to approach how we might be freed for the relationship "ideal" Jesus implies. Although our specific text today has to do with sexual lust and adultery, the "principle" applies across the board of transgression. Over the last couple of weeks I've characterised sinfulness as being a thing not so much to be avoided as a thing *unnecessary*. This has seemed important to contradict the bland moralistic sense that the word "sin" invokes for us today. When Jesus or any other biblical authority says "Don't!", we are most likely simply to hear the sheer prohibition. And, today particularly, we are likely to imagine ourselves to be free agents and simply to evaluate such ethical demands in terms of our own desires.

But, in fact, active for us is not so much desire as need. In our quite affluent society we are more likely to be conscious of what we *want*, and less so of what we *need*, but our perceived needs are still the real motivations for our actions. If we disobey the command, then, though it may feel like we are exercising our freedom, it has more to do with what we feel is necessary for our well-being, whether that feeling is conscious or not.

The commandments of God seem to be in conflict with our own sense of what is required for our well-being. Commandments against adultery and fornication will be dismissed if we believe that it is only through that type of sexual intimacy that we will find ourselves and meet our deepest felt needs. Whether or not such promiscuity actually works in the meeting of our needs is not that point here, only that we would be promiscuous in this way *for a reason*. If we are in a relationship – marriage, for the purposes of this reading – then unfaithfulness would appeal if we don't find our needs met there, or believe that they will come to be met. The sense of *necessity* for transgression here indicates our feeling that our current situation is irredemable, and that we must act in order that our needs be met. Unfaithfulness becomes here a matter not of failing to keep a promise but a matter of believing that I won't find what I need in what I already have.

Entertaining thoughts of possessing yet another when we are already in a relationship is a sign of despair about the possibilities of our current relationship. It is the despair which causes the unfaithfulness. We "stray" or are seriously tempted to stray because home no longer seems enough. Conversely, to deny a serious temptation properly is not simply to remain committed to promises I have already made to another but also a hopeful clinging to as-yet unrealised possibilities in those promises.

This is the same dynamic as we saw last week in the teaching about "murderous" insults: The destruction of another becomes important for us when he or she challenges our grip on ourselves, or on the world. If another makes me insecure, I act to dismiss him or her – or to kill, in the most extreme of cases. There Jesus could make the insult the same as murder because the same basic insecurities drive the actions.

So also with the linking of internal lust and the externally and physically expressed adultery. Part of the problem with "sheer" lust is that it reduces another person to an object. She (or he) becomes merely a potential means to a gratification which is indifferent to her (or his) own needs. But it is not simply a matter of trying to put ourselves in the shoes of others and being challenged about the morals of objectifying a human being in this way. Morally this is a significant consideration, but it doesn't get us to the heart of the problem. At least as important as the morals of my actions are the motivations, for these are not dealt with through simply changing my behaviour.

The motivations matter because they get to the heart of where our hope lies. A few weeks ago we heard Jesus speak of the righteousness which "exceeds that of the Pharisees and the scribes" (5.20). In the teaching which has followed, and which we'll hear in the weeks to come, it would be easy to imagine that this better righteousness is a matter of our purging not only our actions but also our hearts of evil and bad intent.

And this brings us to Jesus' ghastly suggestion that we cut out eyes and sever hands if these things have caused us to sin. This cannot be taken literally, for Jesus has already said that it is not the action but the inner desire which is the point of failure. Removing eyes and hands, then, doesn't get to the heart of the matter. But if we don't literally take up self-mutilation, we must at least take the point seriously. Jesus suggests that the things which cause us to fall in our relationships with each other are as debilitating as a blind eye or a crippled hand. To live subject to the fear that we are stuck in a rut, to imagine that the only positive future we might actually *enjoy* is one which we ourselves construct,

however violently and with whatever damage it causes to others, this is to be tempted into places beyond God's call and beyond our ultimate good.

The outlook will not always be good for us; we will not always be able to see how this relationship or situation can be one in which we will be whole and safe. Yet we might take heart from a thought of Martin Luther, who spoke of God as one who can ride a lame horse and shoot with a crooked arrow. There are times when our various relationships, and even our lives as a whole, feel just like this. And out of that feeling, with its sense of having been abandoned by God and all his good things, we will feel the temptation to disobey, for it will seem that there is nothing else we can do. But the God who makes such impossible demands of us as Jesus seems to make is the God who makes good of our bad situations.

It is easy to hear all these teachings of Jesus as commands to we get our house in order, that God might feel welcome there, as if God's welcome were the only real concern. Yet God does not wait until we are habitable, but simply declares that we are, and looks to see that declaration free us to become more so. Again, this is the same as we met last week: we do not earn our status as God's children but receive it as given, and out of our receiving that gift we learn to become more like our heavenly Father (cf. 5.48). It is so for all our dealings with each other, whether in marriage or in simple neighbourliness.

The possibility of a righteous life begins not with our meticulous attention to all the commands of God – as important as they are – but with God's first command – that we be his children, brothers and sisters of his Son Jesus, and that we learn from him. This burden is much lighter than those we are accustomed to placing on ourselves (cf. 11.28-30), and it is given that we might have life in whatever situation we find ourselves.

For this light burden, and the life it comprises, all thanks be to God, now and always. Amen.