

# Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

12.02.2017  
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## Introduction

This passage forms part of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, bridging The Beatitudes and the exhortations to be salt and light, with the command to 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'. Matthew's gospel tells us that Jesus is the Messiah, the one who fulfils the scriptures. In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew parallels Jesus teaching on the Mount with Moses teaching of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, in Exodus. Jesus's teaching is not meant to supersede the Ten Commandments, but to engage with them in a new way. Jesus teaches, lives, expects a new relational approach to the law. So how do we hear this teaching today? What are the overarching questions it raises for us...are they to do with the law? Or being told what to do? Or are they to do with how to live with each other? With the ability to disagree well, to live with conflict, to face the fact of conflict in our broken world? And then, with reconciliation even?

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## Text

"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. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. 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. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

"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. 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.

"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

“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.

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## Comment

I have some questions, and they are ones that I grapple with daily. What does conflict mean? And reconciliation? But I don’t think these are only questions for me – this passage from the Sermon on the Mount gives us all a lens through which to view Jesus teaching on how we live together, and how we can live better together.

So, what do conflict and reconciliation mean? And why does it matter? Well, if we are to be followers of Jesus this passage gives us some help. Jesus is not only re-telling, or teaching again, what the law means in this Sermon on the Mount. He is here ‘fulfilling the law’. But he is also extending what this ‘law’ relates to. Now, compared to the Old Testament Ten Commandments, the law relates not only to deeds, but to our inner life too. Jesus is radically asking us to alter how we feel, how we relate, how we live both the internal and outer landscapes of our lives. It matters because it relates to our calling as people of God.

This passage brings to mind the Southern African concept of *ubuntu*... ‘I exist because you exist’. Or ‘we need each other’. What Jesus is teaching us here is that we cannot exist as islands, or as sole individuals who relate only upwards to God. Of course, we hope as disciples of Christ that relating to God comes first and foremost in our lives. But in the passage, ‘*So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.*’ we hear a new way of relating to God. Jesus is teaching us that being in relationship with God must mean also being in relationship with ‘the other’ – friend, foe, fellow children of God. And so how we relate to each other shines a light on how we relate to God. And our internal worlds cannot be ignored, or damped down, or split off. Anger, hurt, lust, jealousy, pride, thirst for power are firstly internal psychological or emotional states of being, that can lead to the acts of murder, adultery, violence, conflict that Jesus names here.

The words we hear in this passage are violent words – adultery, murder, divorce, oaths. Words of conflict. Words of hurt. But more than words, of course. These words we hear Jesus saying are also thoughts, deeds, actions, feelings. Jesus is not giving us a toolkit here, though. He is not saying, ‘Do this, don’t do that, and you will be saved’. He is asking us to really consider what these words mean in our lives, our thoughts, our actions. He is asking us to live better together in the face of these conflicts, these hurts. He is asking us to take responsibility for causing and bearing these hurts. He is in fact asking us to reconcile with each other, in the knowledge that our world is broken and that we need to let God in to shine a light on our brokenness. Because only then can we be made whole, restored, forgiven, reconciled.

Equally it is not about never being angry with our sister or brother, nor feeling that ‘niceness’ has to trump ‘real’ and sometimes very uncomfortable emotions. Jesus seems to understand in this teaching that these conflictual emotions are real, sometimes necessary and need to be dealt with. And how does he tell us to do that? By coming to terms quickly, by seeking out those who we are angry with, by restoring broken relationships, by saying yes when we mean yes and no when we mean no. By being truthful and authentic with ourselves and each other. And it is in the vulnerability of these conflicts that God can get in to our lives and our hearts, that we can become free, transformed, reconciled, through his grace.

Matthew in this passage is concerned to help us to understand that Jesus has come to teach us how to discover the nuances of how to live with each other, how to have good relationships, with Him and with each other. In fact, he teaches us that we cannot have one without the other. And that conflict is an internal state, not just a set of actions; that how we orientate ourselves towards the other matters; that how we think and feel about our neighbour matters; that how we relate to each other matters in our relationship with God.

So how does this text enable us to view conflict and reconciliation? How can we use this in our family, work, community relationships?

This passage is about radical reconciliation. It is about how we live, how we understand each other and our relationships, our conflicts and our lives, warts and all. It is most definitely not a rule book – it is a radical and life changing discipline. It allows us to look with honesty at ourselves, at our relationships and our world.

But how do we do that, I hear you ask? Well, recognising our part in conflict, our need for reconciliation as Jesus asks us to do here, starts with sharing our story. With trying to better understand our own stories and those of ‘the other’. The stories of our communities, and our lives together as the ‘body of Christ’.

Stories of woundedness, of deep despair, of lament for a broken past. And stories too of hope, of reconnection, of God’s transforming grace. Stories of conflict and of reconciliation. These are stories that we need to inhabit, and then, to share in hope.

Stories like Therese Mapenzi’s, the winner last year of the Coventry Peace Prize. She works with victims of sexual violence due to the conflict in the DRC. After her visit to Coventry Cathedral, she was so inspired by the Coventry ‘Father, forgive’ that she went home to start a ‘new Coventry’ in the DRC. In the cathedral Eucharist she shared her experiences– a powerful reminder of the need for healing the broken body of Christ that we all share at the altar. *‘Leave your gift and go and be reconciled...’*

Stories like the teenager’s in Cape Town, for whom the mixed race and faith youth group he belongs to has allowed him to tell his story of abuse, and empower him to work for reconciliation in a township school.

Our shared stories of conflict and reconciliation must engage with the world today; with situations such as the refugee crisis. Refugees are fleeing from conflict and war, from fear and persecution. They are not ‘the other’ – they are people like us. I was a migrant from South Africa in 1971, as many of us have been in our free movements around the world. The refugees are not so fortunate. There is of course a significant difference between having a choice to move and being forced to flee. And so we have installed a sailing boat in the nave of the Cathedral, like some of those we have seen on our TV screens filled with frightened men, women and children. This boat symbolises the plight of the refugees, risking all to get to a place of safety. It makes us uncomfortable when we see it, but it allows us importantly to recognise our own complicity in this particular situation of conflict. We have to walk round it to get to the altar...

So reconciliation starts with sharing our stories. Around the table. The table of meeting and the table of the body of Christ. But it does not, must not, end there. Reconciliation means action, too. It is something we practice, and we know we

don't get it right all the time. These journeys of reconciliation can be risky, can be long, are always messy. But we know that reconciliation is about all of us. We are all in need of it, and we can all join in with it. Reconciliation can start with sitting down at the table and listening . Sharing a meal. Inviting someone in. And we can all do that. And yet reconciliation is not about sitting around on cushions agreeing with each other. It is about learning how to disagree better. At least that is the beginning...

Jesus teaches us how to receive the love of God that lies behind, above, beyond the law. It is Jesus himself who fulfils this law and who leads us to forgiveness and to peace.

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## Prayer

### The Coventry Litany of Reconciliation

Following the bombing of the mediaeval Cathedral in 1940, Provost Howard had the words 'Father Forgive' inscribed on the wall behind the Altar of the ruined building.

These words are used as the response in the Coventry Litany of Reconciliation, which is prayed in the new Cathedral every weekday at noon (in the Ruins on Fridays), and is used throughout the world by the Community of the Cross of Nails.

*All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*

*The hatred which divides nation from nation, race from race, class from class, Father, forgive.*

*The covetous desires of people and nations to possess what is not their own, Father, forgive.*

*The greed which exploits the work of human hands and lays waste the earth, Father, forgive.*

*Our envy of the welfare and happiness of others, Father, forgive.*

*Our indifference to the plight of the imprisoned, the homeless, the refugee, Father, forgive.*

*The lust which dishonours the bodies of men, women and children, Father, forgive.*

*The pride which leads us to trust in ourselves and not in God, Father, forgive.*

*Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave*

*you.*

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Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Reconciliation