

One of the drawbacks of following the set weekly readings of the Church lectionary is that one can't skirt those difficult passages that one might otherwise want to avoid. Although I did here about a minister who timed his leave so as to be away when such passages came up!

The section on divorce in today's reading is a very difficult one to deal with, especially since there are those in every congregation who have experienced the trauma and pain of divorce. And that is often compounded by what seems a very harsh statement by Jesus on remarriage after divorce.

But to be honest it is a very difficult passage for all of us, unless you are a person who has never looked lustfully at another person, because that, says Jesus, basically equates to adultery; and unless you have never been very angry with someone, because that, in Jesus book, is equivalent to murder. So, this passage is a difficult and disturbing one for all of us.

So what do we make of all this? As I thought about it, the picture that came to my mind was of one of those diagrams where there is a question followed by a box that says 'If your answer is YES' and one that says 'If your answer is NO'. Each of those options then has another question with a 'yes' and a 'no' option.

So let's say the first question is 'Have you ever murdered someone?' Being a good churchgoer at LMC you choose the 'no' option. Below that is another question, 'Have you ever attempted to murder someone?' Again you choose the 'no' option. There follows another question, 'Have you ever contemplated murder?' Again 'no'. Next question, 'Have you ever been angry with another person? If you opt for the 'no' box there is the question, 'For how long have you had this problem with honesty?'

But, being an honest person, you choose the 'yes' box and it says, 'return to the first question about having committed a murder and choose the 'yes' option. There you find the question, 'Have you made confession for this and sought to be reconciled with the other person?' Again you choose the 'yes' box where it says, 'Your sins are forgiven, go in peace'.

And then you notice that this last statement about the possibility of forgiveness has a connection to many other questions such as 'Have you been divorced? And 'have you committed adultery?' and 'have you stolen?' and questions about all the other 10 commandments and many others besides. All of them have a link to that one that says, 'Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace.' Those were the words of Jesus to the sinful women who washed his feet with her tears. Then too there are similar words that Jesus spoke to the women caught in adultery. He said to her, 'I do not condemn you. Go and leave your life of sin.'

The good news of the gospel is that there is never a box in that diagram that says, 'Go straight to jail, do not collect your £200'. Or words even more scary than that. There is always a way out, if we are willing to take it.

So why these warnings of Jesus about anger and adultery and divorce? The reason is that Jesus calls us to the highest possible standard of behaviour. Indeed, to the standard of Jesus Himself. The last verse in this chap 5 in Matthew says, 'Be perfect therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.' Jesus sets the bar very high. Do we always clear the bar? No, we don't. But that's not the end of the story. It's not even a case of three attempts to clear the bar, otherwise you're out. There's always the link to that box that gives us another chance, a new start.

But the goal remains the same. And the goal is there because when we achieve it, we bring pleasure to the heart of God and we provide an example for others to follow.

Conversely, when we fail, we bring disappointment to God's heart and invariably we bring hurt to ourselves and others. Think of anger. How much hurt and violence does not have its origin in anger. Today we even have that new expression of anger known as 'road rage' – extreme anger amongst drivers that has even lead to a death in some cases.

If we give free reign to our anger there is sure to be some destructive consequence. Equally, if we keep all our anger tightly bottled up inside us, there are sure to be negative consequences. Instead of letting our anger out or keeping it in we need to hand it over. We need to hand it over to Jesus. The safest place to take our anger is to the cross. On the cross Jesus absorbed the anger and hatred and contempt of the world. Jesus understands those feelings and He invites us to take them to Him and place them before Him. And once we have expressed it to Him, He can help us to respond to the other person in a less negative and destructive way.

As I thought about the different issues in our reading the word that came to me was the word ‘respect’. There needs to be respect for the people with whom we may be angry – respect them as a people, despite what may have happened; respect for them as people who, like ourselves, have been created by God and loved by God.

Then, of course, there is the need of respect for God and God’s commandments. We need to respect God’s instructions. God knew what He was doing when He gave those commandments; He knew what damage can result when those commandments are broken.

Also, there is the need of respect for the promises we have made. Marriage is a promise for better or worse; it is a commitment despite an uncertain future. We change, our spouses change, our circumstances change. It’s only our faithfulness to those promises and respect for them that keeps us going.

Another aspect of respect is respect for sex. We need to respect it as the special, precious gift from God that it is. God doesn’t say, ‘Don’t commit adultery because sex is bad’. Rather He says, ‘Don’t commit adultery because sex is good – too good to be used casually and cheaply; it is too precious to be used outside the security of a committed, monogamous relationship.

Speaking of extra-marital affairs someone said, ‘The grass may look greener on the other side, but it still has to be mowed.’ When we are attracted to someone, it’s easy to see only their good points and to see only our spouse’s bad points. The grass may look greener, but it still has to be mowed.

And lastly there is respect for families. The breakdown of marriage invariably brings about damage and hurt – to families, particularly children. God knew that, and that’s why He gave us the guidelines he did. He loves each person, each family, and doesn’t want to see them hurt.

As I end, let me say again what I said at the start: this love of God is so great, that even where we have failed, even where we have disobeyed His commands, there is still the chance of forgiveness. There was for that woman who was brought before Jesus after she had been caught in the act of adultery. There can be for us too as we come in confession and penitence to Him. We too can hear His words, ‘I do not condemn you; your sins are forgiven, go in peace.’