

May I speak in the name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

I did something last week that I've been putting off for a year ever since I've been here. I went to the dentist. I was going to go about six months ago, but then I had this wedding and there were nine beautiful bridesmaids here and nine groomsmen lined up there. They all had the most beautiful teeth. The photographer lined us up. When he said "smile" the room just lit up as the iridescence of their teeth just filled the building. They were all perfectly aligned and I was at the end feeling like Austin Powers. It took away any enthusiasm I had about going to the dentist. I felt that if I went I would open up my mouth, the dentist would look in and just tut and say, "Oh dear. Those English gnashers just aren't good enough. We're going to have to start all over again." In England if you have most of your teeth and you're not in pain, that's enough. If you can bite into an apple, that's a bonus. In America it's so different. The bar is so much higher.

The way I felt about Americans and their teeth is just how the Pharisees in our gospel felt about Jesus and his teaching about the law. They too were thinking, the bar has been set too high, that what they'd been doing simply wasn't enough. They heard this teaching from the Sermon of the Mount and they'd have thought, "We know the law. We keep it. We don't murder. We don't commit adultery. We don't swear. Are you saying, Jesus, that that's not enough? You want us to do more?"

What they'd heard Jesus say was this, "You shall not commit murder. You've heard it said, 'thou shall not commit murder', but I say to you don't stay angry with your brother or your sister. The law says 'you shall not commit adultery', but I say to you don't look lustfully at someone." Six times in this Sermon on the Mount Jesus says "the law says this, but I say to you", and each time he raises the bar. He sets a higher standard.

If you want to keep the commandments, he's saying, what you're doing at the moment isn't enough. Scholars have argued for years about what Jesus is doing here in this passage. Is he contradicting the law or is he reinforcing it? Is he abolishing the law or is he radicalizing it? Scholars have read this passage in both ways. We know from the rest of the New Testament that the emphasis of the teaching there is less on the need for works or obedience to keeping the ten commandments and more on the need to receive God's gift of faith.

Paul is very clear that we're saved not by our endeavors, not by keeping the law, but by the free gift of God's grace in Christ Jesus. If that's the case there are those who conclude that the law is obsolete. That doesn't fit with what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount where he says he came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it.

The answer to this conundrum of the relationship between grace and law is in an acorn. Imagine I had a little acorn in my hand. How could I destroy it? How could I get rid of it? There are two ways. I could put it on the floor and tread on it and squash it and destroy it that way, or I could find a fertile piece of ground, plant it, and if the conditions were right in time it would grow into an oak tree. The acorn will disappear as it's taken up into something more glorious. An acorn is fulfilled as it becomes a tree.

If we stay with this image a moment longer, I think we could come to an understanding of what Jesus is saying about the Old Testament law. He could be saying it was an acorn. He isn't abolishing the law. He's not saying it's no good. Instead, he's trying to plant the law in the hearts of his hearers. He's looking to push people beyond thinking that keeping the law is all about doing the right thing, trying to please God, trying to earn his favor. He's trying to push them to see it as a way of living that flows out of the heart. He's moving from exterior observation to internal transformation. He's saying keeping the law isn't hard work, it's "heart" work.

In the Old Testament, under the old covenant, the emphasis was on the need to keep the commandments so we could curry favor with God and please him. In the New Testament, under the new covenant mediated by Jesus Christ, we find that God's favor, his salvation, comes not as a reward for keeping the commandments but as a free gift of his grace. Jesus on our behalf fulfilled all that the law required so that we are free to live by grace. That's the shift that we see in Jesus' teaching. Jesus is saying "keep the law not to earn God's favor, but in response to God's grace." He's showing us a way to live life. This is the way of life we're to choose.

When we accept God's free gift of salvation and when we receive that gift of new life and a new heart by the work of the Spirit within us, this is how we should aspire to live. What we see in the Sermon on the Mount is not a rule book, but an ideal pattern of life, an ideal way to live. The ideal life of the New Testament isn't a life lived by the rules. It's a life lived in the knowledge and company of God, which is why we don't sing hymns

talking about how much we enjoy keeping the commandments, but we do sing hymns about walking closely with God. That is the aim of the Christian life. Our goal isn't to follow the rules more closely, our goal is to walk more closely with God. The life we're called to is the life of the Spirit which flows out of the renewed heart, a heart renewed by the work of God's Spirit within us.

Before I finish I just want to say something about what this might look like in our context. I want to say something just about the first of the six, "But I say to you" sayings of Jesus. This is how our gospel began. Jesus said "you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders should 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. 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."

If we're to live as Jesus suggests, that's a challenge. It's not just enough to resist murdering each other. We need to be reconciled with those with whom we've been angry. Those of you who have been around Saint James for some time will know that St. James has a history of rather tempestuous encounters. This was very delicately described in the job specification I was given before I came to St. James, which referred to a sometime lack of civility. Now, I'm very pleased to say that this has not been my experience at St. James. I have not found it to be an angry place. That's not enough. The absence of anger is not the goal. Our goal isn't just to find ways of skirting round each other, of coexisting. Our goal is reconciliation. That's our aim, to be reconciled to our brother and sister with whom we've been angry.

To be reconciled with someone is to have that difficult conversation which begins by acknowledging there has been a problem, by saying, "You hurt me", or "I'm sorry that I hurt you." It's having that difficult conversation and then moving forward together. I want to encourage us as individuals and as a church community to have those difficult conversations. There will always be disagreements at a church community, even in the halcyon days of the early church in Corinth. We can see from today's epistle what St. Paul referred to as jealousy and quarreling. That's par for the course.

Let's ensure that as well as disagreements we have reconciliation. Let's aim high in our relationships with each other. I've had a few conversations recently when

I've counseled someone to tell the person who has upset them how they feel, to be open and vulnerable with those who've hurt us, with who we've been angry. Of course that's risky, but that's a characteristic of all those who are called to live this kingdom way of life, which Jesus is spelling out here. We who have been reconciled to God need to work at being reconciled to each other. May we all be given the strength to live as Jesus teaches, not living to keep the rules but walking with him in the way of life and grace.

Amen.