

Throughout the past year, the media on both sides of the Channel have been keeping us informed about things political. We have become used to the style of operation of our leaders and of their close associates. What we used to call 'lies' are now referred to as 'alternative facts', promises are made in carefully couched terms which usually allows for them to be re-translated as simply 'aims' or 'intentions' when honouring them becomes inconvenient.

Many of us can recall the post-war years, when there seemed to be a genuine détermination to learn from the privations and above all the interdependence we had experienced. Now, cynicism and self-centredness, at individual and national level, seem to be the order of the day, with people seeking to gain an advantage over others.

So what's happened to change those feelings of solidarity and the désir to look after the poor and needy? Lets not simply blame the confessed agnostics or atheists; do we still care about others and respect each other? Is it only other people's values and ethics which have changed? Jesus came to a people Under foreign rule and where corruption and self-agrandisement in political and religious circles was rampant.

So, in our reading from the gospel, we learn that there's nothing new in such questions being raised. Earlier in Chapter 5, following the Beatitudes, Matthew has shown Jesus as a Moses-like figure, referring to the Ten Commandments, as he explains that he's not seeking to abolish the Commandments but rather to look at their deeper meaning. Neither is he challenging the Law, but rather extending it to show its implications. Jesus was talking of évolution rather than révolution.

Now, continuing his Sermon on the Mount, he moves from the rules about behaviour to the root cause of that behaviour. This reminds us that God sees right into our hearts and minds. Our God is the God 'to whom all hearts are open, all désires known and from whom no secrets are hidden'.

The words Jesus spoke teach us about révérence for each other, for God, and for ourselves. In the Jewish synagogue, the scrolls of the Law were carried around the congrégation at the beginning of each service so that all might show révérence for the Law. Jesus now extends that révérence to all people, always. If our relationships with each other are broken or wrong, then its very unlikely that we have a good relationship with God. There is no cheap grâce. We each need to look at our own lives and attitudes.

Verses 21 & 22 of the Gospel reading are concerned not only with murder, but also with thinking about murder, or about harming someone. Evil thoughts towards anyone are forbidden. This involves not only the killing of the body but also what we now refer to as 'character' assassination when we seek to destroy someone's good name by innuendo or by faint praise. But all-consuming anger is also sinful, as its contrary to God's command of love, and can lead to violence, emotional hurt, mental stress or spiritual damage. And it keeps us from developing a spirit pleasing to God.

Verses 23& 24 tell us that we are not to offer gifts to God if we have a bad relationship with anyone. We must seek to restore good relations as quick as possible. If we are not willing to listen to others, we are not likely to listen to God. And the longer we take a particular stance against others, the deeper the division becomes - and the same applies to our relationship with God.

We need to have a révérence for truth. At the time of Christ's earthly ministry, Jews used various forms of speech to make vows. They might vow 'by the altar', 'by Jerusalem', or whatever. A slight change in wording could make what sounded like a vow to be not so, There were also ways of getting out of inconvenient vows.

Jesus warns that here is a danger of double standards in our dealings, if it takes an oath to make us truthful. No wonder he taught that a simple 'yes' or 'no' should be enough,- **if** people knew from our previous behaviour, that we could be trusted to keep our word.

So Jesus is highlighting the fact that we have real choices to make. **Not** to choose - to simply go with the flow -is still a choice, but a choice to disobey. Part of our growing up as Christians is that we realise that Jesus is asking us to make a tough choice. After all, he didn't say 'If anyone would follow me, , they should go with the flow and do what comes naturally'. He quite clearly told his disciples that choosing to follow him meant there would be tough times ahead.

As Christ's body here on earth, we are called to grow beyond what comes naturally to humans, and to embrace instead what comes as the fruit of the Spirit and of faith. We cannot excuse our actions by quoting isolated passages from the Bible, if they contradict Christ's command that we love one another. We are required to embrace everyone, however different they are from you and I, with Christ-like tolerance and love, and to show them that there is a better way to live. We have a joyful message to bring, a message of hope, salvation and éternel life -but above all, about love.

Individually, we cannot change the world. We cannot overturn the recent political décisions which have shaken people's confidence in the future they thought lay before them. But with God, anything is possible, and if he really is Lord of our life, Jesus has explained unequivocally that we should live as he lived and love as he loved us. Only then will people know they can trust us to have their best interests at heart and know that our 'Yes' means 'Yes' and our 'No' means 'No'. Only then will they seek to know more about the source of our confidence.

The world is in great need of the good news with which we have been entrusted, but our lives must show we ourselves believe it!

As Christians we are **in** the world, but not **of** the world. Whatever is happening around us, we know God is with us. He has made it known that if we obey his will we can help to bring in his kingdom. Let's pray for that change of heart, that redirection from within, through which alone such obédience can become our second nature - and enable us to be effective Christians in God's world.

Lord, you lead us by ways we do not know; through joy and sorrow, through victory and defeat, beyond our understanding. Give us faith to see your guiding hand in all

things; that being neither lifted up by seeming success, nor cast down by seeming failure we may press forward wherever you lead, to the glory of your name. Amen