Christchurch Cathedral, Dublin, Sunday 29th October 2023.

Sermon – Cannon Professor Jim Lucey

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen

‘Master, which is the greatest commandment in the law?’ Matthew 22: 34-40

In some translations, the pharisee who posed this question to Our Lord is described as a ‘Master Lawyer”. Having attained this high position, we can imagine that he thought of himself as the smartest man in the room. In this case, Christs response to his question must have shocked him all the more. It was a complete rejection of his world view.

The temptation to compete in a game of ethics played by ranking one supposedly ‘good’ behaviour over another, is not only an historical form of hypocrisy. It is the way we humans negotiate the world.

We chose our favourites from lists of ethical standards. We audit our behaviours to serve our own interests. We measure our entitlements and our injuries like items on a profit and loss account.

The problem is not only with our sincerity. It is also with our ‘terms of reference’. When we forget God, and disregard our neighbour, we pride ourselves in our ability but inevitably, we go astray.

Jesus offers us a novel approach. His response to the Pharisee’s question could not be clearer.

So let us pose a similar question to ourselves. What is our ethical view?

To answer this – let us try to see ourselves for a moment as though we were the pharisee, in his case as a master Lawyer or in my case as a psychiatrist.

The great 20th century Christian ethicist, the martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer had much to say about ethical questions in relation to my profession.

He once wrote…

“The most experienced psychologist or observer of human nature knows infinitely less of the human heart than the simplest Christian who lives beneath the Cross of Jesus…in the presence of a psychiatrist I can only be a sick man; in the presence of a Christian brother (or sister) I can dare to be - a sinner…. the psychiatrist views me as if there were no God. The Christian views me as I am, before the judging and merciful God in the Cross of Jesus Christ.”

Bonhoffer recognises that our ‘ethics’ are inadequate and he is correct. Our paradigms are failing. We see evidence of this all around us, in the climate crisis, in our politics and most cruelly in our wars.

In response to war, we make more war. We return to conflict with vehemence, adding more injury to insult, as we have done since the beginning of time, and whenever we do this, we try to present our wars as justified and inevitable.

How can we change?

Jesus offers us the opportunity to reimagine our behaviour, through his mercy.

We could start today by remembering that Gods son once walked along the Jordan, through the same lands of Palestine where thousands are suffering and dying today. We could remember that Jesus view was different from our own. He set aside the old law and he replaced it with a new paradigm. He replaced it with Love and Mercy.

As Bonhoffer puts it, ‘we have two ways to know the will of our father in heaven’.

The first is to recognise the need of our neighbour, and the second is follow the model of Jesus Christ. These two great commandments are the two essential Christian behaviours. If anything we do is to be authentic, to be honest, to be responsible, it must correspond to the model of Jesus of Nazareth, by loving one another.

Christ is teaching us this message even today. Gods perspective is not the old, alienated law of human violence, but a new connected merciful way of love.

God is love. We pray for his peace. We depend upon his mercy.

That is why we have the courage to say, now and forever, and together to our father,

‘…Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth and in Heaven, forgive us our trespasses, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from every evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory.’

Amen.

References

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethics, (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., Touchstone Edition, 1995).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life *Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community*