

Homily. 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time. Year. A. 11/12 February 2023.

There's an old saying that I'm sure some of you will have heard or maybe even used; Keep the law and the law will keep you. This saying says that if we don't break any laws then these same laws will keep us out of trouble, protecting us from incrimination. While this is true from a legal perspective, I'm sure that almost all of us have broken a law or two in our lives or stepped beyond the expected limits of some rule. Maybe it was a traffic infringement or some fudging with our tax return, even a few broken promises or lies that we've told. It's commendable if you've never done any such thing but I think that you'll be an exception that proves the point.

The Scribes and Pharisees were believers in the old saying. Meticulous adherence to the laws, rules and traditions of their time and culture was what they demanded. They held themselves up as being exemplars of the law abiding way, all the while looking down on those who fell short in such matters by choice or by circumstance. As Jesus made clear to us in gospel laws and rules matter, but they are never enough. They set limits that, if crossed, risk bringing us into trouble, but they can't help us to be better and more integrated than the least sinful and criminal amongst us.

Jesus says that unless we go further than being law abiding and doing the bare minimum to stay out of trouble we'll never get into God's way of kingdom living. He asks us, his disciples, to move beyond what is written, legislated and expected into what is possible, deeply good and godlike, the life of our true intentions and our conscience. He says that of course we shouldn't go around killing people, but we realise that there are many ways to kill the life in others by our hatred, arrogance, neglect and evil

gossip. Of course we must honour our promises and commitments to our spouses and to those who most rely on our integrity, but if our hearts have already wandered away from what we've declared are we not already betraying our trust? The same goes for our vows and oaths; Jesus says that our word is to be our bond with our yes and no meaning what they say, adding that anything else comes from the evil one.

I'm certain that we know that what Jesus taught is right and true because every day we try to live by this higher standard, not just seeking safety from getting caught, but aiming for a way of living that has wholeness at its heart. Here I'll say again what I've said often; it's a very short walk indeed from wholeness to holiness of living. This respectful way, this higher standard inspires us in our daily Christian lives, drawing us even now into the Kingdom of heaven and the life of God.

Yet, being human and fallible, we will sometimes falter and fall. This is why the greatest sign of our faith is to be found in mercy and forgiveness, the key point of Jesus teaching, the centre of the Lord's Prayer and the core of every Eucharist we share. For without God's forgiveness of our trespasses and our forgiveness of others against us, laws and rules and legalism is all we've got left. To settle for this as the Scribes and Pharisees did would be a fearful and poor way to live indeed, a standard unbecoming of us who are called in Our Lord's mercy and grace to be salt for the earth and light for the world.