Jesus calls us to cultivate respect, trust, humility and integrity

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Epiphany +6a – Deut 10 12-22 – Ps 119 1-8 1 Cor 3 1-9 Mt 5 21-37

At our Zoom Bible study last Tuesday, we discussed today's (the next Sunday's) readings as usual. We were covering lots of good ground and enjoying our conversation. But when we got to the Gospel, I believe the polite expression is that 'the switchboard lit up'. You'd expect that, because we're still reading the Sermon on the Mount (SoM). It's full of Jesus' most challenging and treasured teachings.

The switchboard lit up particularly because today's part of the SoM has words about divorce. For a long time, the way the Church has misinterpreted Bible teaching about divorce has hurt people who've suffered marriage breakdown, regardless of the cause of the breakdown. And to add further injury, the Church has in the past invoked these teachings to withhold its blessing from divorced people when they want to enter a new marriage. So these words are full of bitter hurt for many people.

It's a bitter irony that the Church's unjust treatment if divorcees has been based on teaching that Jesus gave to confront cruel abuses of divorce law in his own time. A man in Jesus' time could divorce his wife simply by handing her a written statement to that effect in front of a few witnesses – for 'any reason'; for burning a meal; if he didn't find her attractive enough. (Matt 19.3-12) Divorcing a woman in those days left her without any support or means of living. Divorcing

your wife ‘for any reason’ was abusive. Jesus challenged this: he confronted its perpetrators and its proponents.

Yet over centuries, far from confronting injustice and abuse in marriages, the Church has counselled abused partners to stay in marriages where it wasn’t safe for them or their children to be. That’s because the Church chose to understand these sayings as Jesus simply being more strict about staying in marriages than his contemporaries were.

To an extent, this is understandable when reading this passage where Jesus was upping the ante about several matters. Jesus’ words about divorce here come among a series of six so-called antitheses:

Thesis: *You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times THIS …* Antithesis: *But I say to you THIS.*

Jesus *is* challenging people’s assumptions about the Law. But the particular people he’s challenging – as always – are the entitled ones whose privilege somehow makes them imagine they can misuse weaker people with impunity. Jesus is not looking to imprison vulnerable people in unsafe relationships; he’s challenging people who misuse the Law to make others vulnerable in the first place. The things Jesus challenges are all to do with self-entitlement and misuse of others.

When we look at all the things Jesus confronts in today’s passage, it helps to remember that Matthew is aiming these sayings at members of his church community. He’s saying that being angry or insulting or abusive to another follower of Jesus is not on.

In our wider Australian community, we see the fatal potential of entitled anger or contempt in all our domestic violence, in our road rage, in our online trolling and in political tribalism. The resulting deaths and injuries show what it means to dehumanise another person in our heart, and to imagine that’s okay.

There’s no place in the Christian community – or any society for that matter – for the sort of anger or disrespect that harbours within it the potential for harm. In the Church, we don’t yell at each other without sincerely apologising as soon as possible afterwards. We don’t belittle others; we of all people should know that we have no grounds to be contemptuous, because it’s the heart of our faith to acknowledge that we all need God’s grace. Yet the angry, entitled, contemptuous behaviour of many Christians is often indistinguishable from people of no faith

In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew presents Jesus explaining *how a repentant person ready for God’s rule should live*. [(Keener 160)] Angry, entitled, contemptuous behaviour has no place in such a life.

Repentance means to turn from sin and face God: to choose to live consciously in the presence of God. That’s what we see spelt out in today’s Gospel. The Law said (and still says) don’t murder. But Jesus says turn from nursing the anger and contempt that can lead to murder. The Law said don’t violate marriages. But Jesus says turn from nursing the lust that can lead to acting that out. The Law in Jesus’ time said men could initiate divorce for any reason. But Jesus tells us to turn from nursing the delusion that God wouldn’t mind our motives or the violation we’d perpetrate if we did that. The Law said (and still says) don’t swear falsely. But Jesus says turn from the delusion that God might turn a blind eye in our case. It’s important to God and to the community that every member can be trusted to be a person of integrity.

How can we be a community of repentant people ready for God’s rule?

Today, we heard Jesus call us to cultivate respect, trust, humility and integrity. In short, grace. I invite you to picture in your mind’s eye one person to whom you might show a special measure of grace this week. May God give us all the

integrity to live into our high call. Amen