

Homily for 6 (A) p.a.

“For I tell you, if your virtue goes no deeper than that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the Kingdom of heaven.”

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

In a sense, we have a gospel today which warns us against a box-ticking culture. So often, in our professional lives, and when we have to do with public bodies such as the Health Service, or some educational institutions it seems that human realities are lost in the welter of box-ticking that seems to have overtaken genuine human exchanges and interactions. Worse, there has been a cultural metamorphosis so profound that the purpose of some institutions has changed beyond recognition. Education no longer exists to turn us into humane, fulfilled, inspiring individuals, but rather into efficient and useful workers. The NHS no longer exists to help us to live well and without pain, but to live cheaply, as far as the State is concerned, and to die without fuss.

Someone the essence of what it is to be human is lost is that approach to life and what is precious about the human individual is no longer discerned and valued. Now, you may object that God has offered us some boxes to tick, boxes called commandments...

Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image

Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.

Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work:

But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates:

Honour thy father and thy mother

Thou shalt not kill.

Thou shalt not commit adultery.

Thou shalt not steal.

Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.

Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's.

You may be thinking: well, six out of ten isn't bad, is it? 60%? A pass?

Well, our first reading tells us that we have the power to keep the commandments and the Lord himself says: “The man who infringes even one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be considered the least in the kingdom of heaven.” 60% is not a pass mark, apparently. But the Lord, while stressing the importance of the commandments per se, goes further. He is calling for a complete transformation of our inner selves so that sin has no root in us. We are called to turn so completely away from hostility, lust, resentment and godlessness that the occasions of sin do not arise or, if they do, do not have an influence on us.

So, the Lord is not against clear and objective standards of behaviour, but he is saying that the boxes of the Law are just the beginning, and a very inadequate beginning at that. He is also saying that there is no room for complacency. Of course you must keep the commandments, but you must do far more than that, you must, as Paul says, in a phrase whose meaning is now destroyed in our current appropriation of it, you must be a law unto yourselves. When people say that these days they intend it to describe barmy, unpredictable behaviour, or behaviour that is personal to a fault. What Paul meant, of course, was that someone who is in Christ has obedience to God welling out of him or her and God’s way of doing things deeply imprinted in their very nature. With such people, the Kingdom just happens. Our love of God and the indwelling of the Spirit transform us into creatures who are capable of the seeming impossibility of not just keeping the commandments, but living within the spirit of them. We are all on a journey, and we may not be saints yet, but it is possible for us, through God’s grace. Above all, we aren’t expected to do it on our own. We have a lot of help, if we remember to ask for it.