

How do we respond when we observe people behaving badly? In the piece we just heard from the first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul tells his readers that they are spiritual infants as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among them. They are behaving like children and not mature, adult Christians.

If you have ever watched our political leaders indulging in abusive and bullying name-calling in parliament, perhaps you also found yourself wondering why people in positions of such responsibility would behave so badly. Where are the adults when we need them?

What does it mean to be a mature, adult Christian? Do we recognise this maturity in others? I think we do, so then how can I discern it in myself? How would I know whether I'm a grown-up or an immature Christian?

Maybe I can look back on my life and tick off all the commandments I've obeyed. Right, I haven't worshipped any other gods or idols- tick. I've never murdered anyone- tick. I wasn't very good at honouring my parents when I was a teenager.... but that was a long time ago, so- tick.

Keeping the sabbath day; now it's getting tricky. I don't remember ever desiring anyone's ox or donkey, but Grand Designs can give me serious house-envy....

Obedying laws and rules isn't what makes us mature, and we know that breaking them- sinning- doesn't mean we're finished as Christians because there is always forgiveness in Jesus. He had a lot to say about how we should live and he modelled a life of generosity, compassion, inclusiveness, forgiveness, and love.

Today's gospel reading continues the Sermon on the Mount, as Jesus spoke about anger, adultery, divorce and oaths. At first sight this teaching appears harsh; so we need to read it in its proper context if we are to understand it.

As we heard last week, Jesus said in verse 17 of this chapter, 'Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.'

When he says, 'You have heard that it was said.... but I say to you....' Jesus does not discard what the law has said, he doesn't tell us we don't have to worry about these old laws; what he says is tougher because he asks us to examine our motives and what is in our hearts.

Jane Williams writes, "This passage in Matthew decisively contradicts those who would like to see Jesus as a kind of well-meaning hippy, preaching an 'all you need is love' kind of gospel. In every single case, Jesus takes the prohibitions of the law and makes them even harder to obey."

Jesus tells us that the fulfilment of the law is to get to the root of why we break it. We are to look inwards, beyond the outward behaviour the law prohibits.

Anger is the root of murder, lust is the root of adultery, and if I behave according to the rules whilst seething inwardly with rage or desire my heart is not changed, I am not fulfilling the law.

Jesus demands our whole selves- not simply the outward appearance of right living but our hearts, minds and bodies. What we do matters, and so does what goes on inside us.

You may notice that Jesus tells us if a person has something against us, we are to leave our gift at the altar and go to be reconciled with them; mending the relationship is that urgent. He doesn't say if we have something against them; this is about putting things right as far as it is in our power when we have wronged, hurt or offended the other person. Humility and the ability to recognise when we are in the wrong are adult traits.

When we get to what Jesus has to say about adultery it's interesting that he only addresses men lusting after women, as if women don't lust after anybody! But in the context of patriarchal first-century Judaism, men had all the power and the freedom while women had very little.

His teaching about divorce must also be read in that context, because men of that time were able to divorce a wife with ease, moving on to a younger model if they felt like it. Divorced women could be put out of their homes, along with their children, and left to fend for themselves- which could mean poverty and destitution.

This was a time when life expectancy was short, childbirth could be fatal, and the kind of marriage relationship breakdown people might experience today was not envisaged.

Jesus wanted women and men to be treated justly and fairly, as he demonstrated in his life and teaching. All relationships between adults are to be characterised by love and forgiveness, and a willingness to work on the inevitable difficulties when they occur.

The final section of this reading is about swearing oaths. Jesus wants us to be people of such honesty and integrity that when we say yes or no- we mean it. We don't need to swear on a Bible to make a promise extra-specially binding, because we will always tell the truth and keep our promises.

Becoming an adult, mature Christian sounds like hard work! We must be scrupulously honest; always admit when we are wrong; always try to make amends and heal damaged relationships; and never be angry or jealous.

No, that last bit can't be right! Could any of us say we will never look at another person and find them desirable? I don't think that is what Jesus meant at all.

It is where those desires lead you, the fantasies you'd like to become reality, that are the problem because of the damage that may do to our relationships.

And anger can be justified and energising, prompting us to do something about situations of injustice or cruelty. I'm angry about the people and things that are destroying our planet, I'm angry about this country's treatment of asylum seekers.

I'm angry about my church's inability to agree and act on inclusiveness- so I write letters and talk to people and join protests and do what I can.

Becoming a truly mature adult is a long hard process, and some people never manage. Becoming a mature Christian is also hard work, and perhaps takes more than this lifetime for many of us.

Wisdom is a defining characteristic of a mature person, so we need to read our Bibles with wisdom and not the immaturity of literalistic fundamentalism.

Fortunately, we have the Holy Spirit's wisdom to help us, Jesus to learn from, and God to give us growth. Thanks be to God!