

Reflection for the Sixth Sunday of the Church's Year

“Look after the pennies and the pounds will look after themselves” is a saying most of us would have heard as children. It’s an eighteenth-century proverb meaning that if we are attentive to the small details the big stuff will take care of itself. Another proverb from that era is “a stitch in time saves nine” – in other words, it’s better to solve a problem immediately rather than allow it to grow into a much bigger one.

It’s worth keeping these thoughts in mind as we approach today’s gospel. Jesus starts with the big things – murder, adultery and swearing falsely and works backwards to smaller things that can be taken care of in order to ensure that the big things do not become issues at all. So, Jesus repeats three times, *“you have heard that it was said.....but I say to you...”*

Firstly, *“you have heard it was said to those of old, ‘you shall not murder’”* - that’s the big stuff! - *“but I say to you...”* do not be angry with your brother, do not insult each other, be reconciled to one another and *“come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court.”* These are the smaller things that must be mastered before they lead to more serious offences. Jesus’ point is that if we address our anger and aggression then we will have no inclination to murder.

Jesus says something similar in respect to adultery. *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’”* – that’s the big offence - *“but I say to you...”* do not look at another with lustful intent, do not sin with your eyes and your hands. We have to master our desires, our lust, our cravings, and in our modern world, where sexual content is poured out from every TV screen and over the internet, this may prove to be a challenge like never before.

And finally, Jesus speaks about being as good as one’s word, being reliable and trustworthy. He says, *“you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘you shall not swear falsely’”* - once again stating the big offence - *“but I say to you...”*, do not take an oath at all but *“let what you say be simply ‘yes’ or ‘no’”* and be as good as your word and mean what you say. Practice honesty and trustworthiness in the little things and it will follow in the bigger ones.

Lent begins on Wednesday, the season for starting afresh, for repentance and penance. Today’s words from the Sermon on the Mount are a timely reminder to us to address the small habitual failings of everyday life, the bad habits we have fallen into, the ways we have gone astray. Lent is a time to pay attention to the small details in order to effect great changes and draw nearer to God. In today’s gospel Jesus warns us that *“unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

Let us ensure that Lent is a time from which we benefit and grow in love of God and of neighbour.