

### 3 Before Lent Yr A 2017

#### St David's Eucharist

Deuteronomy 30.35-20; 1 Corinthians 3.1-9; Matthew 5.21-37

The Saturday before last the colour magazine of my newspaper had a cover depicting a naked couple with the woman lying face down on a surfboard and the man standing above her with a pole, punting them over a calm blue sea. The caption was 'The World's fittest couple' and an aside in brackets saying ('Don't worry they don't go to Cornwall').

This was the taster to the main piece about an extreme exercise regime run by a couple whom the writer describes as 'resembling a kind of giant middle-aged Barbie and Ken' –both are 6ft 3in tall. There are rules about what you must eat –or not eat (the regimen includes fasting) – and of course a formidable exercise routine, including whacky ideas that doing 20 mins of headstands a day counters the effect of gravity so that 'you probably wouldn't age'.

Apparently people pay good money for this.

Diets, cooking, life style, exercise, healthy living – they are a whole industry these days and one that can be immensely profitable. But you suspect that is the bottom line for a lot of it – it's commercial quite as much, if not more, than it is personal and born out of a desire to improve individual's lives.

Now turn to today's gospel. 'Don't get angry, it's the first step to murder.' Don't come to worship with a grudge against your neighbour go and sort it out – yes, leave the sheep you were about to sacrifice and walk two days back home sort it out and walk two days back to

Jerusalem and then offer your gift. If your eye tempts you to lust dig it out, if your hand reaches out to steal cut it off.

This is the moral equivalent of extreme exercise, or at least it would be if you couldn't see the compassionate smile in Jesus' eyes as he says it to you. Unlike the fierce puritan fervour of our ultra-fit Hawaiian couple, Jesus – as the rest of his life and ministry show – is only interested in rules in so far as they save people from messing up. Jesus' real concern is the salvation of the individual so that the community they're part of can be healthy too. And if that means using deliberate exaggeration to draw attention to deep truths, then that's what he'll do. The language he uses is extreme but the truth it reveals is life-giving.

And we all know if we stop to think about it that what he says really is true. So much human misery and sadness comes from deep down inside – the angers, desires, frustrations and fears which are the roots of our actions and can lead us to do and say things which once said or done have consequences that we can no longer control, like the furies escaping from Pandora's box.

Jesus knew that keeping the law was only superficial, the rules were guidelines to living, but time and again he wants people to get to what lies behind the law – dispositions of the heart, we might say – so that they and the people around them can live in ways that are creative and fulfilling. That demands self-awareness and it requires self-discipline. The great musician doesn't become so without day after day of practice, alone, concentrated, focussed on the goal ahead. But the result is not just a personal pay-off but one that touches others and, in the moment of performance, draws everyone together in an

experience which is beautiful, moving and somehow true, real, touching an essence of things.

That's why Paul is so bothered by what he hears is going on in the church in Corinth now he's not there. There's in-fighting, there are factions, one wanting one thing and another after something different, there are resentments and pride, there is fear and anxiety, probably because he isn't there any more. Oh dear, it sounds all too familiar! You recognise it from your own experience as much as I do from mine. It happens in churches quite as much as in other organisations.

Personal dispositions, in other words, play out socially. The idea of private morals being somehow separate from public ones is a delusion. That's in fact one of the key understandings of Jewish and Christian spirituality. We live in relationships. Mar those and the canker spreads. We see it in world affairs – the character of leaders influences their words and choices which in turn play out on the widest stage, affecting the lives of millions.

Jesus knew this and in the end it took him to Calvary. The Suffering Servant, he carried our sin and bore our iniquities, as Isaiah says, and in so doing not only showed us a different way to live, but, amazingly, gives us grace to live like that too. He not only shows us, he empowers us to become like him in our relationships with others. If society is marred by individual behaviour it can only be healed by it too.

The other day I had an email from a good friend who these days has returned to his Quaker roots. And he sent a press release which went out a few days ago in response to recent world events. It quotes Margaret Fell, one of the founders of the Society of Friends, writing to

Charles II: 'We are a people that follow after those things that make for peace, love and unity.'

The press release goes on, "We condemn all acts of government which set people against one another; which discriminate against people because of who they are or where they were born. We reject policies which condone suspicion and hatred; which turn away those who need and depend upon our help. We were not put on Earth for this, but to be a people of God, to live in harmony with each other. There can be no peace without justice; no love without trust; and no unity without equality.'

It's the same insight we hear from those ancient scriptures from 2,500 years ago. This is the tradition in which Jesus – and we – stand. It is one that speaks of a God who seeks fullness of life and joy for all people, but one who would have them choose freely. I remember once hearing the passage from Deuteronomy memorably read in the Negev desert, a place where, to this day, knowing the right way to go can be vital. Where the group stood two paths diverged from each other. And this is what we heard –

'See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall

perish... I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.  
Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD  
your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to  
you and length of days.'

Amen.