

OUR LADY, STAR OF THE SEA, WEYMOUTH

HOMILY FOR THE 7th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)

19th FEBRUARY 2017

What do you say when someone asks, “**are you religious?**”

That raises the question: “**What does it mean to be religious?**”

Jesus’ teaching in chapter 5 of St. Matthew’s Gospel which we have read for the last three Sundays and conclude today, is a big part of the answer.

He says in the last verse: “This is the way to be perfectly **religious.**”

He says five times: “You have learnt how it was said --- But I say this to you.”

He is presenting a new **vision** of God.

Religion is essentially a person’s **response** to his/her vision of God.

The Jewish people had learnt to see God as a law-giver and judge, compassionate as our psalm tells us but still a judge, and been taught to respond to God by keeping his Law which, in the Ten Commandments, still form the basis of the Church’s moral teaching.

The appropriate **response** to law is obedience.

But, says Jesus, “I say this to you --”.

Look at the final example in today’s Gospel: “You have learnt how it was said: You must love your neighbour and hate your enemy”, a rule with clear limits.

“But I say this to you: You must love everyone, even your enemies;” no limits; a different response to a different vision of God.

Jesus invites us to see God, not as an official judge but as a loving Father.

People have no personal relationship with a judge in court, but they have a very personal relationship with their fathers.

They have different priorities. For a judge it is to uphold the law; for a good father the welfare of his child comes first.

Jesus invites us to see God as Father and relate to him as a son/daughter.

This is what Pope Francis tells us in his in his teaching document, *The Joy of Love*.

He particularly concerned with Catholics who have been divorced and remarried.

He knows how hurtful it is for those who have been betrayed by their husbands or wives and found love in a second marriage only to be refused Holy Communion because Jesus prohibited divorce.

The Church has taken this teaching as a rule to be obeyed in every situation, but Jesus gave his teaching to protect us from abuse not to compound our misery.

The Church has no problem with divorce; only with remarriage after divorce, so Pope Francis asks clergy to show remarried couples special care; Pope Francis echoes Jesus in today's Gospel, changing priorities when he says moral teaching is not enough; reality must come before ideas of perfection.

This puts into perspective Jesus' command that we must be perfect.

Yes, we must be holy because the Lord our God is holy (First Reading), but we live in an imperfect world which limits our freedom to be holy.

I quote: "We (the bishops) also find it hard to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations. We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them."

Discernment in this context means seeing the God of mercy helping each person to survive difficult situations with their faith undamaged.

Pope Francis is responding to his vision of God as a merciful father who calls us to respond by being merciful even to our enemies; to walk with them through their experiences; to be there to support them.

That's being religious.

Rev Geoffrey Carey