

'You shall not murder'. The very simple sixth commandment. Could anything be clearer? I am struck by its directness. We have had five commandments so far which have either a few introductory words, or a few explanatory words, or perhaps, as with the fifth commandment, a possible outcome to encourage us: 'so that you may live long...' The sixth commandment, and the following four are much more succinct. It is as if God is saying; 'You don't really need any further explanation. Just do these. Keep them.'

It is, of course, only clear if we know what murder is. It does not say: 'Do not kill'. Israel had the death penalty. Israel (and every other nation as far as we hear) used killing in warfare to defend and attack. Nevertheless this is a very striking prohibition of killing anyone outside those contexts of the death penalty and war.

The power of such a commandment is that it has made us stop and think about killing. It has made some pacifists. It has made some oppose the death penalty. It does this because it challenges us to justify killing another person.

Jesus takes this a step further: *'You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, "You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment," But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, "Raca," is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, "You fool!" will be in danger of the fire of hell.'* Matthew 5.21-22

Jesus knows that anger leads to murder; not in every case of course, but it is the beginning of a slippery slope that can have terrible consequences unless it is controlled. Destructive feelings need to be addressed and expelled before they take hold.

This month we mark the holiest season of the Christian year, in which we commemorate the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We mark the road Jesus took from the acclamations of Palm Sunday (turning sour very quickly), through the events of the Last Supper, arrest and trial, to the despair of Good Friday and the joy of Easter.

Perhaps Jesus' own warnings about the dangers of anger come from personal experience of being the victim of murderous plotters. Whether we call the death of Jesus a murder or a judicial killing it is clear from the accounts of the Gospel writers that ill-founded motivation and trumped up charges brought about an unjust crucifixion. The distinctively forgiving manner of Jesus' own attitude to his killers provided not only an inspiration to those present, but also opened the way to new life. This resurrection life is founded on forgiveness. It opens the door to ways of living in which murderous anger has no place.

So we could sum up by saying that the sixth commandment forces us to question every thought that leads to killing another human being. Not only this, by his teaching, and by his death and resurrection, it is shown by Jesus to be a warning against hurtful and potentially disastrous anger.

In a world so tragically addicted to death and killing it stands as a cry from the heart of God to us all. 'Stop the killing. Turn from anger. Learn to be reconciled'.