

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Septuagesima Sunday
February 12, 2017

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“The Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us.” That was the great game changer. When Almighty God entered His creation as son of Mary nothing could ever be the same, nor *should* it be the same. The New Covenant was up and running. In the Mass Gospel last Sunday Our Lord Jesus told His disciples to let men see their good works and so bring praise to Our Father in Heaven. But an important question remained. It was about *conduct*. What would be the new relation between the gospel of forgiveness and the moral demand of God? Would Jesus use His authority as God’s Son to relax the 613 commandments found in the Mosaic Law?

The inaugural address of the New Covenant is The Sermon on the Mount. In it our Blessed Lord sounded the keynote of the Kingdom of Heaven. St Matthew’s Gospel devotes three chapters to the reporting of the sermon, and this coverage is given us in installments each Sunday in the last weeks before Lent. The series began on January 29th with the Beatitudes. Now of course you can spread the *contents* of the Sermon on the Mount over three or four Sundays. But you cannot cover the Lord’s *teaching* in three or four sermons!

The way it is presented by Our Lord, the New Spirit is contrasted with the Old Mosaic Law not as opposing the old law but *perfecting* it. In the passage you heard today this principle is stated and then examples are given. There is a contrast between murder and “internal murder” (anger); between adultery and “internal adultery” (impure thoughts). In the light of the New Spirit divorce, once restricted, is now abrogated. Oaths once regulated are now declared unnecessary. When anger, impurity, and infidelity give way to a working charity, something happens. Oaths are not needed because where charity is operative it is no longer necessary to swear by another. Your word is your bond.

You do not need me to tell you some people push back on “organized religion.” Nobody had more rules and regulations than the Catholic Church! Think of all those rules, canon law, rubrics for how to say Mass, etc. But the reason all those things exist is none of us has yet arrived at the perfection of the Church Triumphant. We operate in the Church Militant, where we still strive against sin, the world, and the devil. Laws exist for lawbreakers. But there are no rules in

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Heaven because Heaven is where God is, and God is perfection. So think of The Sermon on the Mount as a window into the heavenly realm. We want to get there.

The fulfillment of the Law does not add more rules! The New Covenant, ushered in by Christ, calls us to catch from the lips of the Son of God the heavenly principles of which the old Mosaic Law was a rough and temporary expression. The Lord said the principles of the Law are to be *lived*, not simply obeyed. And something else is made apparent here. Christ is free to interpret and apply the Old Testament Law in a way that gives us its fullest expression of Divine intent. Only God's Son is in the position to know and declare Divine intent.

In the Incarnation Almighty God changed His method of operation but not His intent. What Our Lord Jesus taught had antecedents and clues in the annals of the Old Testament. Ancient Israel knew the principle "My ways are not your ways, said the Lord." When the prophet Samuel went to find David, the Lord told the old man, "God does not see as man sees but looks on the heart." In so many ways the Old Testament is one long preparation for its fulfillment in the coming of Christ.

So when the Christian's nature cooperates with grace and his focus is on the Lord, the disciple's lifestyle and character become clearer. He will have less and less need for anger, impure thoughts, and all the things proscribed in the old law. Rather, the Christian will live less affected by the capriciousness of secular worldly trends and more according to divine plan. There will be less selfishness in his decision making and in his judgments. And the Christian disciple will be unafraid to be severe on himself. Why? Because he is secure in the One Who loves him unconditionally.