

Everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

Lust is not one of my usual themes, but strong words nonetheless.

The one piece of good news in these seemingly very threatening words is that Jesus appears to be speaking only to men; that must be because women don't suffer these temptations! On first hearing, the words of Jesus are troubling. They are troubling because anger and lust are very present, very real and very powerful and they are troubling because of the punishment of which Jesus speaks: the hell of fire!

In 1992, when I was a probationary minister, together with others, I was on retreat on the Isle of Skye. On the Sunday morning, we attended the local Church of Scotland parish. It was around this time that the former Liberal leader, Paddy Ashdown, had admitted having an affair. At that morning service, the theme of the Children's Address was the immorality of the Paddy Ashdown. I decided not to concentrate on that broad theme with the children this morning.

In our Old Testament lesson this morning (from the Book of Deuteronomy), Moses spoke to the Hebrew people, the people of the Exodus, of how to live and truly prosper; he shared with them his meditations on divine law. Moses said,

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.....

Moses goes on to warn the people:

But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to others gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish.....

In Scripture, our attention is repeatedly drawn to what lies in the heart. The ancients understood that the seat of goodness and the seat of wrongdoing are located in the human heart, in the soul, in the very core of our being and consciousness.

The dramatic language of Jesus, with calls to cut off offending limbs and gouge out sinful eyes and the threat of being thrown into fires of hell, are pure hyperbole. The language is not to be read by the metaphorically challenged. People who read poetry as prose should not read Scripture alone. Like many of the ancients, Jesus

understood that it is our thoughts which lead to action. Unguarded thoughts, thoughts of anger, jealousy or lust, can lead to actions that we are likely to regret. If we are not careful, our thinking or wrong-thinking can progressively justify itself to us. In talking about murder, Jesus tells His hearers to confront and overcome anger. Every other week there are news reports of a killing, a murder which has occurred because of one person's rage. How many family members have had their life brutally ended by a loved one or friend? It was uncontrollable anger which led Cain to murder his brother Abel. The Socratic philosopher Heraclitus said, 'Sow a character, reap a destiny.' These words apply to everyone, from pastor to president.

In addressing anger and lust, Jesus is exposing and facing the demons within. The seats of goodness and evil lie in the human heart. Burning with anger or lust can be a hellish or hell-fire experience. The rabbi from Nazareth, Yeshua, was a teacher of *kavanah*, a Hebrew word which emphasises inwardness and self-control. Jesus believed that the boundary between our inner thoughts and outer actions was permeable; He believed that the more we succumbed to lustful thoughts the more likely we are to act on that desire.

Yeshua's intention is to protect us from ourselves. To be thrown into the hell-fire, to live there, means to live in the shallower world, the world of nature and its consequences.

Jesus was a teacher of *kavanah*, of inwardness, self-control, of the life within. He taught His hearers inner discipline; He encouraged them to wrestle and resist their inner demons; and He modelled what it meant to live within the presence of the Eternal, from the Holy in the midst of life. In the nineteenth century, the Scottish minister and writer, George MacDonald was renowned for his creative and imaginative work. He is described as an inspiration by W H Auden, C S Lewis and Tolkien. It was in reading MacDonald that C S Lewis said that his imagination was baptised. G K Chesterton said that MacDonald's book, *The Princess and the Goblin*, made a notable difference to his whole life.

In that work, *The Princess and the Goblin*, MacDonald tells the story of an eight-year old princess who discovers a woman in an attic room, a woman who describes herself as the great-great-grandmother of the princess. When the princess enters the room, the woman sits spinning a thread of light which is woven through all things and

which she invites the princess to hold in her hand wherever she goes.

If she does so, the princess will feel her great-great-grandmother's presence wherever she goes. Later, the princess takes a friend into the attic room but only the princess can she the old woman.

Wherever she goes, the princess holds the thread of light. What is significant about MacDonald's tale is that, through a children's story, MacDonald wrote of the God who is immediately present, immanent in the whole of creation. There is no place we can be where the Divine, the Absolute, is not. It is significant because MacDonald wrote at a time in Scottish Church history when Calvinism taught that God was distant, separate from creation, cold and detached.

MacDonald's repeated use of characters such as a princess was intended to show our worth, the worth of every human being, in contrast to our wretchedness in Calvinist theology. We are to hold a thread of light, the same thread that runs from end to end through the cloth of creation.

It is this theology of immanence, that the Kingdom of heaven is within you, which Jesus taught. If we envelop ourselves in the presence and peace of God, make these traits the hallmarks of our character, we can face and fight the inner demons. Placing ourselves

in the embrace of the Eternal, in the Spirit of Yeshua, we take ourselves to a place of warmth, security and fulfillment. Inward control is not easy, but Jesus knows that. Don't be misled by His use of hyperbolic images. When we look into the eyes of Jesus, we see only understanding, compassion and love. The best metaphor for our relationship with the Holy is that of lovers: we are lovers, and we have nothing to fear.

At the end of the Book of Deuteronomy, we read of the death of Moses. Moses, as you may recall, is the one who, in meditation and contemplation, saw God face to face. It was on Mount Nebo that Moses died. We are told that *at the LORD's command*, Moses died. The Hebrew for 'at the LORD's command' literally means on 'the LORD's mouth'. In other words, in the Hebrew tradition, it is said that God took Moses' breath away with a kiss, with an intimate gesture of love. We are lovers: that's how I see God.

Amen.