

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 16th February 2020
1 Cor 3: 1 – 9; Matt 5: 21 - 37

I've never done it myself, but I have seen it done, and it doesn't look easy, giving birth to a child. When I saw it done, I decided against doing it myself ever.

Giving birth to a child is what it is because the human race is a victim of its own success. What distinguishes us from our closest relatives as human beings are our big brains. We don't use brawn to get by in this world, we use brains. To appreciate that difference you don't need to compare a puny human to muscle-bound chimpanzee all you need to know is where humans and chimpanzees live; we live in cities, they live in trees.

That is why childbirth is what it is. Trying to get that skull enclosing that brain into this world is no easy thing. Because it is not easy, human beings cannot wait any longer than 9 months after conception to do it; any longer and the baby's head would be simply too big to get out into the world. So, human beings, relatively speaking, are born more immature than any other mammal.

Childbirth is only the beginning of the challenges young human beings face in the world because of the size of their brains. Because they are born so immature, humans are helpless for a relatively long time once they have made it into the world. Both chimpanzees and humans have a gestation period of 9 months, but chimpanzees will be sexually mature by the age of seven.

As for humans, well my son is seven, and we are still teaching him how to hold a knife and fork and not eat with his fingers. That is the main challenge for us human beings with our big brains. Our society is not built on brawn, it is built on relationships, and these relationships are incredibly complex. It takes years to master manners at the dinner table, and manners at the dinner table is but a small drip in the pool of social complexity that makes up human society and culture which, to survive and thrive, humans have to master.

It is not inaccurate to say, for example, that a human being is capable of becoming a parent to a dependent infant almost a whole decade before that parent is capable of confidently and competently looking after herself or himself in a job and in a home.

That is true of life as a human being – it takes us decades to reach social maturity - and it is true too, argued Paul in our reading this morning from his first letter to the very young church in Corinth, of those human beings who have been born again into a new life, the life of Jesus Christ.

In that letter Paul made this point about social immaturity in the young to the distracted and squabbling members of that church. He literally told them to grow up. 'You are God's garden,'¹ he said to them. He even pointed out to them their immature table manners, 'I had to deal with you as infants in Christ ... And so I gave you milk to drink, instead of solid food.' I remember giving my son solid food for the first time, it was messy. The church in Corinth was in a mess too, caused by their attempt to move on to solid food before they were mature enough.

I can't imagine that the Corinthians were happy to read this letter; no grown adult likes to be called a child. But, Paul was frustrated because the members of that church were distracted

¹ 1 Cor 3: 9

by the cleverness, wisdom and sweet words of church leaders, and were paying more attention to their relationship with these men than to their relationship with God and to each other.

He could see from that, that they had some maturing to do. After all, this tendency for young humans to follow the lead of more mature, clever, wise, articulate humans is all part of the growing up process. Think, for example of the legend of the Pied Piper whose sweet music lured children away from the town of Hameln. That was what was happening in Corinth.

This letter is as much about Paul coming to terms with faith in Christ himself, as it is about helping the members of the church he founded in Corinth to come to terms with their faith. Being a Christian is not something that comes upon us fully formed, it is something that requires a reorientation of our relationships with the world around us and those who live in it. Developing a relationship with God, through Jesus Christ, and with other Christians, and reorientating our relationships with the world around us as a consequence of our faith, takes time. It takes a lot of time to mature as a Christian because we are human and our relationships with each other, which form the basis of our complex functioning society, are themselves complex.

Later in the letter Paul will set this out more clearly, and elsewhere in the New Testament the Gospel writer John will make a similar point. Fundamental to being a Christian is having a relationship with God, with others, and with the world that is based on love. For both John and Paul, this is the distinctive thing about being a Christian. Christianity is fundamentally about building a new kind of relationship with God, with other people, and with the world around us.

But, relearning relationships takes a long time for human beings, indeed I think we would all agree that learning to navigate through human society and its complex relationships, whether you are a Christian or not, takes a lifetime. We are indeed God's garden, and we are always growing in the light of his presence.

Jesus, in our Gospel reading, makes the same point – indeed he made it first. He focusses on that part of the process of growing up in this world that we learn from an early age, and that we rely on in future years, but, once we are fully grown adults, we have to learn to negotiate in more subtle ways – rule keeping or law abiding.

Crucial in our maturing is learning how to follow the rules. Children have to learn this from an early age, if only to keep themselves safe crossing the road. Interacting with the law is something we have to learn to do well if we are to flourish and prosper in adulthood; if you can't interact with the law successfully then life is much harder, opportunities fewer, and freedom curtailed.

But, with our big brains we soon learn, after we have learned how to keep the rules, that rules and laws are insufficient in our complex social world if they are rigidly black and white.

In the Sermon on the Mount, which we have also been reading through over the past few weeks, Jesus' purpose was to encourage those listening to reflect more deeply on the way their society was built on the basis of law-keeping. In that society, people's relationships with God, with each other and with the outside world were defined by what was right and was wrong, what was black and what was white.

Last week we heard Jesus say in verse 17 of the chapter we read today, 'Do not suppose that I have come to abolish the Law ... but to complete it.'² He recognised the importance of law, as we all learn to do, but, then this morning we hear how he taught those listening to him how to use the law to build up their relationships with God and with others.

For example, he pointed out that the law says it is illegal to commit murder.³ Following that law might keep you out of prison, but following it won't save you and help you to live in the Kingdom of God as a whole person, unless you find a way to cope with the anger in your heart that leads you to have murderous feelings. As maturing adults, we need to learn that good relationships don't develop well just because we avoid murdering our friends.

Yes, you won't be legally responsible for the breakdown of your marriage if you manage to keep the law that says, 'Do not commit adultery,'⁴ said Jesus this morning, but following that law is not enough to save you or your marriage. If you don't address the issues that have given you a roving eye, don't expect your marriage to be one long Valentine's Day celebration.

Yes, legally, you will be listened to if you are able to lay your hand on the Bible and tell the court on oath that you are telling the truth, but don't expect that performance to be enough to convince anyone outside the court that you are trustworthy.⁵ If people aren't taking you at your word, no law instructing you not to break your word will change that. You need reflect on the state of your relationships that have caused such distrust.

Every day is a school day for human beings. Every day is a school day for human beings because we have big brains and a complex society. It takes years to learn how to function socially in human society. It is extremely difficult to learn how to build mature relationships with yourself, your parents, your children, your spouse, your friends, your work colleagues, not to mention your enemies, as Jesus will point out in the next chapter of this Gospel. No wonder people become impatient or take a short cut, and resort to immature relationships, ones based on being led by the strong and the convincing, or ones based on black or white, right or wrong rule-keeping.

But, for Jesus in the Gospels, and Paul and all the New Testament authors, those lazy short cuts, and immature impatience won't save you or build the Kingdom of God. To do that we need to build relationships with each other, and for Jesus, Paul and all the other New Testament authors, those relationships can only be built on love if we are to be called Christians. But, it takes time, it takes a lifetime.

² Matthew 5:17

³ Matt 5: 21

⁴ Matthew 5: 27

⁵ Matthew 5: 33 - 37