

**All of a Piece**  
**Sixth Sunday, Year A**  
**Matthew 5: 17-37**  
**13 February 2011**

Egypt was in the news for a different reason about 1600 years ago. Revolutionary change of a different sort had just occurred, at first in one individual, and then spread to many others by a process of infectious enthusiasm.

In those days Egypt was a Christian country, and one of its most famous sons was a man who came to be called Anthony of Egypt. In his youth he was a somewhat whole hogger individual who on hearing at Mass the gospel words about selling everything, giving the proceeds to the poor, and following Christ, did just that, and then disappeared into the desert to spend long years there, off everybody's radar screen, battling temptation and trying for personal transformation. When he emerged again on the fringes of civilization what struck both friends and curious spiritual tourists was his settled nature, the balance and moderation of his personality, and the serenity of his disposition. In appearance he was neither gaunt and emaciated, nor rotund in the Friar Tuck manner. He appeared to be at peace with himself, indeed there seemed to be a quiet joy about him that was rather attractive. Somehow he had acquired an existential density to his character, together with a charm and a lightness of touch that was mercifully free from the intensity and one sidedness that sometimes go with those who have gone all out for God.

Without a doubt the Holy Spirit had a lot to do with this result, but Anthony had cleared the ground for its life giving operations through a process of considerable inner struggle. He had spent years battling his temptations, which often appeared to him in vivid imaginative forms. Those who would follow him in to this way of life, the so called Desert Fathers, wrote down many telling anecdotes about their own struggles with lust, gluttony, anger, pride, and self righteousness and hyper critical condemnation of others. Away from the distractions of their routine lives all of these internal nasties came out of the closet, and tried to derail the Christian growth path of this the first generation of monks.

The science and spiritual skills associated with temptation busting came to be called asceticism. In an age in which we hardly ever hear about disciplines like fasting the ways of asceticism are seldom heard of in the contemporary church. Though that is beginning to change. One recent author has tidied up Evagrius of Ponticus' spiritual classic for modern consumption in which he helpfully lists a Bible quotation to fit every kind of temptation that might come our way, so that we can repeat it as a prayer mantra as a way of telling an unwelcome thought to go away.

Asceticism is really a set of common sense guidelines and boundary markers drawn from the accumulated wisdom of the Church that helps Christians to turn today's gospel passage in to a personal reality. It was demanding teaching that we were listening to this morning, and we might be inclined to give it a miss as just too difficult. Indeed, Jesus himself had trouble living up to his own words. You might recall that he ended up calling the Pharisees "fools," and drove the merchants out the Temple with a whip of cords. But apparently righteous anger is allowed us in his new dispensation.

But Jesus' teaching this morning isn't an optional extra for Christians – a kind of coast-to-coast event only for spiritual athletes. For it is about being "all of a piece," as George Herbert put it in that wonderful poem "Constancie" on the front cover of the Grapevine this morning. And we have to be "all of a piece" in the world we are living in now because its comforts and electronic entertainments offer us multiple opportunities for drawing what broods in our hearts out in to the open.

Take for instance the huge issue that Internet porn has become in our society with employers paying IT experts to spy on their employees web site visits, and horrified spouses finding out what their husbands are looking at late at night, and children giving themselves an early sex education that their parents hadn't counted on. As Jesus pointed out in his teaching on lust and anger we may complacently think that we are in the clear because we are too cautious and prudent to go around bashing or bonking people, but if our imagination is brimming over and burning with the desire to do so then we are half way on the road to committing these acts, and we will be inclined to give ourselves away with various vicarious ways of indulging our fond imaginings.

What welled up in the hearts of the Desert Fathers is there in all of us, and it will come out in the front our minds given half a chance, and will alter our motivations in a variety of subtle and unhelpful ways. Which is why we, like them, have to come to a sober self-knowledge of ourselves. We have to develop an acute insight in to the particular situations, places and people who have the potential to trip us up. "Lord, I know that if I spend too long in too unguarded a manner with this person I will be highly likely to indulge in gossip and the sharing of personal information about others that will be neither kind nor fair."

There are habits of heart and mind that are helpful, and others that are not. We might like to think about the kind of subjects we daydream about, and the kinds of feelings that go with them. The Buddhists have a scary saying. "What we desire, and want, and dream about today, we become tomorrow."

Above all becoming “all of a piece” requires a constant spiritual vigilance, for in the Christian life we are always going forwards or backwards, we are never standing still. I have listened with interest to what some Catholic priests have to say about what it takes to live up to the law of celibacy. In a highly sexualised culture there are some situations they try hard to make sure they never get themselves in to. And their prayer life and intimacy life with God has to be nurtured and kept alive to avoid the kind of rebelliousness or sloth that thinks, “to hell with it – why shouldn’t I kick over the traces.” It is more than just saying to themselves, “Thou God seest me,” in every nook and cranny of their lives. Rather it is about becoming a friend of the Trinity, and behaving in the respectful and caring ways that friends do to each other.

I am going to finish with one of the collects from our New Zealand Prayer book for the first Sunday in Lent that cuts to the heart of the matter:

God, you know better than we  
the temptations that will bring us down  
Grant that our love for you may protect us  
from all foolish and corrupting desire.