

Living well – how to live contentedly...

2 Samuel 11;1-17; 25-26 and Matthew 5:27-30

John Beckett St Matthias Church, 1030am, Holy Communion

This week, I have drawn the short straw...

Left to me to explore Jesus teaching about lust based upon commandment number 7, in today's look through the Sermon on the Mount: do not commit adultery.

At its most basic Old Testament meaning, don't have sex with someone else's husband or wife.

We have actually coined the phrase "affair" for this – it sounds so much nicer than "adultery" but it's no less wrong, and no less destructive.

Already some people here will be feeling very uncomfortable where they have failed to follow this commandment in the past – or indeed suffered as a victim of it. But do not despair.

Let's flag up right away, that Jesus said he did not come into the world to condemn the world, but to save it for he loves each one of us and the Gospel is good news.

Which is just as well, since Jesus goes on to say that we can commit adultery as much in our desires as well as our actions. chapter 5 verse 28: but I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman (married or not) lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart... I'd be surprised if he did not include a prohibition on women looking lustfully at a man.

Richard Foster writes wisely I think, that Jesus does not mean us to be feeling perpetually guilty with the casual glance or fleeting thought – but that we do recognize when the deeper and only precariously controlled appetite is aroused in us.

So, now we are all uncomfortable.

But before we tackle this further, we need to begin with number 10 of the commandments - for root of lusting after someone, needing to "have them for ourselves" is all wrapped up with "do not covet".

Actually, the Hebrew word for covet, just means desire. It is a neutral word. It's when that's desire is misdirected that it becomes wrong, and as we know too well it is often misdirected towards things – or people - that we cannot have or should not have.

And if that is the root of the sickness then that is we need to begin.

J John begins his chapter about covetousness in this great book 'Ten' – drawn heavily on this morning...by reminding us how often we feel that:

the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.

Or, that However long you take agonising over the menu deciding which sweet to have, when the next person's desert arrives, you realise you have made the wrong choice.

People, he says, live in one of two tents: content and discontent

The first symptom of the disease is a sense of discontent. You'll know that our major national industry encourages coveting – we call it advertising. And given that our favourite national pastime is shopping, and that we can never quite get enough of it, you'll also quickly see how covetousness is a serious issue for our whole economy, a root of theft and crime, a reason for war, the health of our planet let alone our spiritual health.

John D Rockefeller, at one time the richest man in the world was asked “how much money does it take for a person to be really satisfied?” He replied “just a little bit more”.

The Discontent of this disease blinds us to all the good things – and relationships - God has already given us, and stops us being thankful.

We can see that all the way back in Eden, when the desire for the one forbidden apple overcame the desire to please the God who had so generously and graciously provided everything that was needed.

Once the disease begins, the discontent not only prevents gratitude from functioning , but also makes us fearful.

Without God as our chief desire, we look towards material things to find recognition, self-worth or fame, and comfort. Wonder why over 94% of people have played the national lottery.

Discontent. Fearful.

And driven.

We are driven by compulsions to own, to have things...whether that is TV box sets, Pokemon ‘Go’ or beyond to a real Shopaholicism ... bigger barns needed... debt levels go up and up.

And in a similar way and for related reasons, we can be easily driven by lust, wanting to have someone else’s body that is not ours to have – with at least the consequences of compulsive secretive behavior and unchecked, broken families and broken lives as well.

Apparently Michael Douglas, when charged with adultery in his divorce proceedings pleaded “diminished responsibility”. “Sex”, he claimed “is a wave which sweeps over me, the impulse that is, and when the urge comes I’m helpless, every time”

See what happened to King David.

His covetous lust for Bathseba blinds him to all that God had already given to him – He already had several wives and concubines! – but he let his guard down – and abuse his power to obtain what he should not have had. Window shopping suddenly became very costly. He corrupted his best army officer in the web of deceit and lies. He became a cowardly murderer. poor Bathsheba.

Lust is more of a problem of course because our sexual desire is very powerful and very deep. It is easily inflamed

and more than ever before with the Internet we are tempted every which way we look.

Discontent. Fearful. And driven by misplaced desire to have and to own more and more. Yet we are empty.

Society's apparent sexual freedom has brought the opposite. We are enslaved.

So, the symptoms are there for any good doctor to reach a diagnosis.

So to the diagnosis – whether particular sexual sin or a general covetousness...

This misplaced desire and the lack of gratitude that goes with it are rooted in - serious heart disease.

Is it treatable you ask?

Is there any hope doctor? Of course there is hope!

God still loved King David. Remarkably God still used David. In God's economy, redemption is always possible. We CAN live contently. But it is not easy.

Jesus says he came to give us life in all its fullness. And if the son sets you free, you shall be free indeed.

We might hope to be treated with a few tablets, but the condition is so serious, that it needs major heart surgery.

How do we go about that:

the first step is to accept the diagnosis. So often we do not or will not see it. It took the Lord sending Nathan the

prophet to David to confront him before the King would accept it.

The second is to ask God for that new heart you know you need. Come to the Christ who died on the cross To set us free.

Repent, confess our misdirected desire and our lack of gratitude and ask God to replace that with a fresh desire for Him, his ways, his kingdom and he will forgive us and renew us by the holy spirit.

Choosing Christ's way of life means turning around.

that means we have to move.

Indeed Jesus is incredibly direct and strong in his words here and elsewhere in Matthew's gospel.

If your eye or hand causes sin then pluck it out or cut it off.

He does not mean that literally but it is an indication of how important it is that we do act however painful that might be in the short term.

As TS Elliot wrote in East Coker:

The wounded surgeon plies the steel

That questions the distempered part;

Beneath the bleeding hands we feel

The sharp compassion of the healer's art

Resolving the enigma of the fever chart.

If we are chained to material things, then start giving more things away. If you keep going into debt – cut up your credit card – and seek help.

If you are having an affair, as J John says, pick up the phone today and stop it. If it's pornography, throw it away, delete those images. Again, if you need help, seek help, it's often very valuable to have someone to be accountable to.

Which of these do you need to do today?

But as well as the heart surgery, there is the ongoing preventative medicine:

In relation to learning to live without lust eroding contentment, here's some of J John's advice:

- invest in your marriage, be thankful for your spouse - and if you are married support single people – it's a great way to live to – look at Jesus himself.
- Guard your eyes. Careful about what you watch and read.
- Resist temptation - God promises he will always give us a way out (1Cor 10)
- don't flirt if you're married, Be careful about what you wear, if you find yourself attracted to someone then be wise about how long you spend with that person and where...
- J John concludes perfectly: "it is better to shun the bait than to struggle on the hook"

But, more fundamentally, how can we continue to keep our heart desire where it should be – loving God and his ways above all things?

It is a choice we have to make each day.

Have you noticed how often St Paul tells us to be thankful....? Or take Psalm 100 for example...*enter his gates with ...thanksgiving...*

Developing this attitude of gratitude can cultivate contentment.

To be thankful to God that Jesus forgives you and sets you free. Look around you – be Thankful to God for how richly he has provided for you- with people who love you, and with material things.

And we can choose a radical obedience to him as well. Move from Commandment 10 back up to Commandments one and two - In every possible way we put God back on the throne, make him our hearts desire. Then we can live freely, and contentedly as God desires for us.

Psalm 86:

Teach me your way, O LORD,
that I may walk in your truth;
give me an undivided heart to revere your name.

¹² I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart,
and I will glorify your name for ever.

¹³ For great is your steadfast love towards me;