I think it is safe to assume that none of you came to church today hoping for a good sermon on anger, adultery and divorce! I can assure you that I did not spend the past week filled with an ever-growing desire to address these issues. But our church is committed to a common lectionary and so the Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany we get Matthew 5 with its hard words from Jesus on these very topics.

At the heart of our Lord’s teaching today is a clear concern for the damage we can cause through our anger, our tendency to abuse and defile precious relationships and the harm we cause when we compromise precious trusts and commitments. Anger is a powerful force. Some have said that we are living in the age of anger.

Now not all anger is bad. Our Lord was often angry at the religious leaders of his time for the way they enslaved people under a burden of rules and requirements. We know that moment when Jesus was outraged to find merchants selling animals and exchanging money in that part of the Temple that was reserved for non-Jewish people to worship.

Jesus fashioned a whip from ropes and drove the money-changers out, a classic example of what we would call righteous indignation. But that is not the anger our Lord is addressing in today’s Gospel. He is talking about the kind of anger that is ego-driven, the kind of anger that is filled with jealousy and resentment, the kind of anger that wills and often causes pain and suffering for those whose only offense is that they displease us.

Jesus also speaks about adultery and divorce this morning. I doubt any of you need those terms defined! But I would encourage us to think of the many ways, beyond the obvious destruction of a marriage covenant, ways that moral compromise can cause serious damage. The word adultery means literally to make something impure, to pollute what should be clean. How tempted we are everyday to abuse the variety of trusts we have.

Jesus wants us to understand what undermines our relationship with others and ultimately our relationship with God. I am convinced that this is what our Gospel lesson is really addressing. We create a precious trust when we enter into a meaningful relationship with another, within our family and circle of friends, at our workplace, and certainly within our congregation.

In many ways this lesson from Jesus is one of the most difficult texts for us to understand. Matthew sticks our nose directly into the Ten Commandments, that ancient collection that most of us would prefer to ignore or, at best, think of as The Ten Suggestions. But our Lord ratchets up the weight of these requirements by insisting that we cannot sidestep them and the ideals they contain.

He makes this clear in verses that immediately precede our text, “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. Truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass away from the law until all is accomplished”.

So begins Jesus’ powerful commentary on what it means to live as a citizen of God’s Kingdom. He speaks about the importance of making peace with those around us and not allowing conflict to define us or to get out of hand. He addresses the danger of unbridled personal hungers that can easily lead us in a direction that is personally harmful and generally destructive to the welfare of those around us.

Most of us are convinced that all we need to do is live by the simple creed, Love Jesus and do whatever we want. I would challenge us to think about the law of God not in terms of doing a certain number of impossible things before breakfast, but in terms of being in the right relationship with God and with those around us, and remember, when we know Jesus, we discover how we should live for and with others in this world.