

**Reflection on the Gospel-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A
(Matthew 5:17-37)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

We sometimes forget that Jesus was a faithful Jew who observed the Law handed down within Israel from generation to generation. Today's gospel brings us the continuation of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus, the faithful Jewish teacher, addresses his Jewish disciples and the Jewish crowds gathered to hear his words.

The mission of Jesus ("I have come to...") is to fulfill the law, not to do away with it, and fulfilling the law is a question of "righteousness". The Greek term for righteousness, *dikaïosunē*, translates both the Hebrew *sedeqah* meaning "right relationship" and *mishpat* meaning "justice". The righteousness of the official teachers of the Law, the scribes and Pharisees, their manner of relating to others and their notions of justice, are judged to be quite inadequate for those who are part of God's reign, "the kingdom of heaven" in Matthew's terminology. The righteousness of Jesus' followers is to "exceed" such minimalist interpretations and expressions of the Law.

Jesus, authentic teacher and interpreter of the Law, offers six examples of the righteousness that "fulfills" the Law. Four of these examples are included in today's reading. What was heard "of old" is contrasted with what Jesus wants to say to them. In the first instance, they all know that the Law forbids murder. They may not have considered the connection between unrestrained anger or murderous thoughts and murder itself. In a series of cascading sentences, Jesus presents a charter for reconciliation and forgiveness. He reminds his audience that true worship demands a forgiving heart expressed in action. He includes a fairly pragmatic reason for settling out of court: you may actually find yourself in prison. There may be an implicit criticism here of the increasingly punitive legal system of the time.

The second example puts "lustful looking" on a par with adultery. In an age of easy access to internet pornography, this example has a particular resonance. Such activities make a travesty of gospel righteousness. The third example on divorce is complicated by the exceptive clause, "except in the case of *porneia*". *Porneia* referred to any illicit sexual activity. Here it probably means marriages within degrees of kinship prohibited by Jews but not by Gentiles. The question seems to have arisen as to whether couples in such unions could stay together on becoming Christian. While Jesus presents the ideal (no divorce), we have to put this teaching into a broader context. Writing to the people of Corinth on this subject, Paul allows for exceptions, since "God has called us to peace". The fourth example is about swearing on oath. Righteousness calls for honesty and transparency in every day dealings. If the words we use are congruent with the intentions of our heart, we should not have to invoke God as a witness to the veracity of our claims.