

There was a report recently from the Bible Society which claimed that young people do not know the Bible stories or know that certain stories, like Jesus' Nativity, come from the Bible.

Before we sneer at the youth of today, we might consider whether our own knowledge of the Bible is up to scratch. Matthew in a self-referential note describes himself as a learned scribe who is “like a house-holder who brings from his treasure-store things both old and new” (13,25). He was immensely knowledgeable about the Scriptures and various translations of the Scriptures and he rightly expects his (Jewish) community to be just as familiar with the stories of the Hebrew Bible. When Jesus deepens the demands of the Law in his Sermon on the Mount it might appear that he is asking the impossible. “Do not murder”, is a command of the Law given to Moses, and is accepted by most societies as needful for the preservation of society. But “Do not get angry” is asking for something beyond our possibilities, surely?

But hearing Jesus' words, Matthew's community would immediately recall a famous Old Testament story which begins with anger and quickly accelerates to murder. And just in case we miss that point, the original story also includes offering sacrifice and, here is the give-away, brothers. What is the story which is essential background to understanding what Jesus is saying in this re-writing of the Law given to Moses on the mountain?

The answer: Cain and Abel. After the expulsion from the Garden, things quickly got worse. The two brothers offer sacrifice. That of the shepherd, Abel, is accepted; that of his elder brother Cain, the farmer is not. And no reason for God's response is given. Cain's anger leads to jealousy and murder. How to avoid murder? Don't get angry. An early biblical teaching, which illustrates clearly the point Jesus is making.

“You have heard how it was said, 'Do not commit adultery', but I say this to you, do not look at a woman lustfully”. A terrible biblical episode lies behind this saying of the Lord which again would have needed no second reference for Matthew's audience, but we may miss it completely. Who looked lustfully and that lustful look led to adultery and murder, and a eventually complete break down of family relationships?

Read the story of David, the great King and the hopeless father. He lounged around when his army was in the field. They were sleeping rough and fighting for him; and he was taking long siestas. He saw Bethsheba bathing, and despite learning she was the daughter of one of his soldiers and the wife of another, he summoned her. Bethsheba's only words in this story are, “I am pregnant”. To cover his crime David arranges for her husband to be killed in battle, fighting for him, and, for this to

happen without suspicion many more elite warriors must die as well.

Jesus then talks about oaths. The well-known background here may well not be in the Hebrew Scriptures but a contemporary story, which Matthew tells us later in the Gospel but which might well have been familiar to his audience. Who made rash oaths and then was too embarrassed to go back on them and the consequence was the death of an innocent man? It has probably happened often but it happened when Herod Antipas, ruler in Galilee and the area across the Jordan from Jericho, had a party and his wife's daughter danced. The hapless victim of his drunken oaths was Jesus' mentor and friend John the Baptist.

In order to avoid sin, Jesus is saying, don't just avoid the crime. Take care about all that leads up to the crime. Every major sin starts somewhere. Cut the evil off at source and you will be obeying God's commands.

Seen in this way his teaching is not absurd nor unrealistic; just the application of common sense.

We may lament that young people do not know biblical stories or their origins. However, those of us brought up on bible-tales along with fairy stories of witches and fairy-godmothers, wizards and wands may well have grown up and thrown them all out together into the waste bin labelled "Untrue; for children only". If people come to reading the Bible in later years there is every chance that they might come to appreciate the biblical books as both the revealed Word of God and brilliantly composed works of literature, among the greatest every written.

The Bible itself is a treasure store filled with things both old, and when our eyes are opened to see, things wonderfully new.