When we first read or hear today’s gospel, we can’t help but find it rather challenging. Taken once again from the Sermon on the Mount, it contains three of six sayings of Jesus in which he contrasts traditional biblical moral teaching with his own version of it.

It is not enough, Jesus says, simply to avoid murdering someone or doing him serious physical harm. One needs to go further and eliminate or at least mitigate the thoughts, feelings, and, above all, the emotions that lead people to violent actions of one kind or another. The problem today is, if anything, greater than ever. We see it in road rage, in arbitrary violence on our transportation system, and in young people swarming and harming individuals who are more or less defenseless.

In a second saying, Jesus urges us not only to avoid adultery and anything else that undermines family life but also the kind of actions that can make it more likely. A major factor at the present time is pornography which is apparently one of the prime uses that some make of the web.

How should one respond to these and other moral challenges? It is not always easy given all the factors that are involved in our m oral decisions from our personal psychological state to the kind of culture and society in which we live. The more we hear of people who cheat on their taxes or are dishonest in regard to their work the more we find ourselves enticed to do the same.

Today’s first reading is from the book of Sirach, one of the so-called wisdom books of the Old Testament. The text we read a few moments ago seems to say that goodness is simply a matter of will-power and of choice. ”Before each person,” it says, “are life and death, good and evil and whichever one choses that shall be given.“ As important as choosing and choosing righty are, it sometimes takes years before we recognize the choices that face us and sometimes even more years before we are able to act on what we have come to see.

As crucial as moral integrity is for us, our families and our society, Christianity does not believe that moral effort by itself is ever enough. There are so many negative things in our hearts and in the world and culture in which we live, that choosing the good can seem at times to be all but impossible.

St Augustine offers a fascinating model of a Christian struggling to choose life and goodness and Christ and finding himself for an extended period unable to do so. When he finally does make the choice, he discovers that he has only been able to do so because of the presence in him of a something that has strengthened his will in a way which, on his own, he was incapable of doing. He identifies what made the difference simply as grace, an inspiration from within that moved him to open himself in a new way to God and to his gifts.

The Sermon on the Mount begins with the Beatitudes. “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” Jesus says, blessed are the meek and the merciful, blessed are those who seek justice and who work for peace. Such people are called blessed because they are blessed by God, endowed with God’s Spirit, inspired to embrace the good.

The more we grow in the Christian life, the more we realize that our choices are a response to a prior gift. Life in Christ is both gift and challenge. The gift comes first and enables us to make the kind of choices that we would like to make.

In Jesus something new has come into the world. Those who were touched by it called it the gospel, the good news of what God is doing for us in Christ. In him God is present in our midst in a new way. The world, in spite of all that is negative and destructive in it is permeated with grace. Our challenge is to be open to God’s gift. “You did not choose me,” Jesus once said, “but I chose you.” I chose you, he adds, so that you might become the kind of person you are called to be and do the good of which you are capable - for yourselves, for your families and for the world.

Sacraments have always played an important role in much of Christianity and especially in the Catholic Church. They remind us of that the initiative in our faith is always with God. Although this is particularly the case with infant baptism, it is true of all the sacraments.

In the Eucharist, for example, the risen Christ gives himself to us as the bread of life. What is asked of us is that we open ourselves in faith to his gift and allow it gradually to transform us into his likeness.

In the sacrament of the sick, the risen Christ comes to us in our weakness and vulnerability, sometimes to cure us and more often to offer us the gifts of courage and peace. In the sacrament Jesus continues the healing ministry which was so much a part of his earthly life. What he asks of us is faith and trust, the kind of faith and trust which, at the end of our life, will enable us to make our own the words of Jesus on the cross, “Father into your hands I commend my spirit.”