

The True Law

A sermon preached by Revd Viv Bridges on Trinity 4, Sunday 14 July 2019

Refs: Deuteronomy 30.9-14, Colossians 1.1-14, Luke 10.25-37

Although we're all familiar with the story of the good Samaritan, the Holy Spirit is always at work, giving new ways of looking at familiar things. My inspiration this time came from today's Deuteronomy reading.

"¹¹Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. ¹²It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' ¹³Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' ¹⁴No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe. "

There are different interpretations of what this means. For me, today's readings highlight the difference between that law of God that has only one purpose - to enable us to love him and to love our neighbour here and now - and a law that has to be observed for its own sake, often detached, cut off from real life and from the people who are expected to obey the law.

The law that God gave us was to love. Moses listened to God and wrote down how that was to be carried out in everyday life. But as the years went on, Jewish lawyers added bits and pieces - which had nothing to do with the reality of life but were more likely to give them additional power and wealth. Gradually, observance of this Law became an end in itself. It was more important to obey the letter of the Law than to show mercy and compassion. The Law had become distanced from real life.

This misuse of the Law by so many Jews was exactly what Jesus challenged, time and time again, and that led to his death. He plucked food, healed the sick on the Sabbath Day, met and touched the sick, the outcasts (including lepers), and he touched and raised the dead. Repeatedly he asserted that mercy and compassion were what mattered - and that this was, in fact, the true Law of God. So rather than doing away with the Law, he was actually fulfilling it, reminding people that God's true law was about loving - God and each other.

The parable of the Good Samaritan illustrates this. The priest and the Levite were professional Law abiders. Anything that caused straying from the Law would mean that they had to undertake a lot of penalties. In this case, touching a wounded man would have rendered them unclean, unable to carry out their Temple duties until they had gone through much ritual cleansing. They obviously felt this was far too inconvenient, so they distanced themselves from the wounded man, and from God's law of love.

The Samaritan, on the other hand, had God's Law of love in his heart, even though he may not have realised it. His immediate response was one of care and concern, of mercy. He crossed over to tend to the wounded man. He didn't do just what was necessary then disappear. He took him to the Inn to be looked after. He promised to come back to make sure the man was alright and pay anything that was needed.

So observing God's Law is a matter of love. Love of God, of faith in his love, of faith and trust that Jesus Christ was his Son, and love of neighbour, realised by showing mercy and compassion, forgiveness, helping out, doing those good works that St Paul frequently spoke about.

Sadly it's relatively easy to misunderstand some of Paul's letters. He speaks a lot about justification by faith alone. This has been used as an excuse for saying that it doesn't matter what we do. It's only what we believe - or say we believe - that matters. This is, of course, complete nonsense.

If we truly believe in a loving God who showed his love through his incarnation in Jesus Christ, then that belief has to spill over into love of neighbour, by showing mercy compassion, living by Christ's values.

The other thing that we might misunderstand is the way Paul makes the contrast between flesh and Spirit.

Paul never says that the flesh is evil of itself. What he says is that putting love of fleshly things before love of God is wrong. He says that the body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit which can be used to God's glory. We demonstrate our love of God to those around us by the way we use our bodies, by what we say, by how we look at people - with hate or with love, with kindness or with frustration, by the things we do for people. We need to put our love of God first by praying to come closer to him and for guidance from the Holy Spirit. Then our bodies, souls, hearts and minds become one in our love of God and of others.

The priest and the Levite got things wrong. They strayed away from God's Law of love because of their obsession with rules and regulations, with what was written in books. God's law is not a matter of books, something outside of ourselves. It's a matter of the heart, immersed and inseparable from everyday life, however messy and unpleasant that life may be. Jesus himself came to show us this. He immersed himself in the messiness and cruelty, as well as the joy and the pleasures of life, here and now.

Without vigilance and care, rules, regulations and laws can become cut off from real life. Sadly, this is what seems to happen in religious organisations with deeply embedded, traditional rules so difficult to change.

I believe we live in exciting times. People who were once considered outcasts, unnatural or evil are at last being given their rights, value and worth. I'm sad that this is happening since society has become more secular. In its laws, secular society began to recognise the rights of women, LGBTI people, the physically or mentally disadvantaged, the vulnerable, many years ago. Parts of the Christian church have been very slow to follow this. It seems to want to distance itself from what is happening in the world, or at least some of what is happening in the world. It didn't take long for contactless collection plates to appear! Parts of the church still won't recognise the true value of women or LGBTI people. Some still haven't fully atoned for the terrible abuse of the vulnerable which it shut its eyes to in the past. Some churches still don't welcome the mentally disadvantaged. Such actions aren't just passing by on the other side, they cause the wounds themselves. This is done by people who name themselves after Christ, a man rooted and grounded in love and acceptance.

Such actions may be taken out of fear or a mistaken idea of holiness. Holiness is not about being perfect, protected from the messiness of real life. It's about being bound up in Christ, who demonstrated God's unconditional love of all his creation by getting right in amongst that messiness.

For us, then, the only Law that matters is love. God commands us first to love him, so we must focus on trying to deepen and develop our faith and love. We must try to open ourselves up to God's presence here and now in our lives, in our minds and in our hearts. This spiritual life, rooted and grounded in prayer, must overflow into love of our neighbour, into actions in the real life in which we find ourselves.

This may mean that we must do things we would rather not do, to accept and work with people we would rather keep away from. Those many sermons we have heard about the parable of the Good Samaritan have taught us that this is part of loving our neighbour. We shan't be able to do everything, and we shall fail, time and time again, but God always forgives. We should never stop trying. The two greatest commandments, to love God, and to love our neighbour, cannot be separated. They are interwoven, just as in Jesus Christ, the divine, the spiritual, was inseparable, interwoven, with the messiness, the ugliness, the joys and the pleasures of physical life.

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