

Law and Justice

Preached by Tony Lemon, Licensed Lay Minister at St Peter's Wolvercote, on Sunday 8 February 2014 at 8.00 and 10.00.

Isaiah 58, 6 (part) 'Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice'; Matthew 5, 17 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law of the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil'

This morning's readings from Isaiah and Matthew both embody themes of rebellion and revolution, and there are unmistakable parallels between them. In Isaiah there is a call to repentance and a promise of restoration after the long period of Israel's oppression and exile. The Israelites are represented as a people who seek the Lord day after day, practising righteousness, fasting, but ultimately not seeing the truth. Their fasting is portrayed as serving their own interests, something that does nothing to change the way they live their lives and relate to one another: they oppress their workers, they quarrel and fight. Their fasting means nothing to God in the face of their sinful behaviour. His fast means loosening the bonds of injustice – letting the oppressed go free, sharing their bread with the hungry, giving the homeless a roof over their heads. There are many parts of the Old Testament that we struggle with, but this concern for the poor is a theme running through the law and the prophets, and one which implies a social revolution that is wholly compatible with Jesus' message in the Gospels.

The revolution which Jesus sought to begin was a revolution with a difference. He had to do two things at the same time. He had to show the Jews of his day that his movement was the true fulfilment of all that Israel had believed and longed for. Winston Churchill, faced with recriminations following the disaster of Dunkirk, made a perceptive comment: 'If we open a quarrel between the past and the present, we shall find that we have lost the future.' Jesus too needed to unite past and present in order to lay firm foundations for a new future. But he also had to show that he and his followers really were living by, and dying for, the new way that he was preaching. He was certainly a great Jewish teacher, but he sought to go far beyond that, establishing new way for all humankind. Our Gospel today shows how Jesus sought to hold these two things together. He was indeed offering something utterly revolutionary, but this was also the reality to which Israel's whole life and tradition had pointed: he has come to fulfil the law and the prophets.

Yet at first reading what Jesus says seems utterly astonishing. Here is the man who has repeatedly broken what the Jews called the Law, most visibly in his healing of sick people on the Sabbath. Yet here he is telling people that they must not break the least of the commandments. Were his words as puzzling to his listeners as they are at first sight to us? Perhaps they accepted them as characteristic of the cultural norm of overstatement to give force to argument. But I think there is more to it than that, because it was clearly important to Jesus that he made himself clear. So often his words jar with us, because so much has changed in two thousand years and we cannot easily grasp what words would have meant to a Jewish audience so distanced from us in time, history, culture and expectations. Here we have to realise that the Jews used the expression 'The Law' in several ways. It could mean the Ten Commandments, or it could mean the first five books of the Bible – the Pentateuch. The Jews also used the phrase 'The Law and the prophets' to mean the whole of scripture. Finally, they used it in relation to the laws of the Scribes, the laws observed so meticulously and insisted upon so authoritatively by the Pharisees. Jesus, in insisting on complete respect and fulfilment of the law, cannot have been referring to this last sense of the term – the Scribal law: rather he must surely be referring to the Law and the prophets, emphasising the enduring importance of Israel's heritage and insisting that it be fully respected as critical to, and wholly consistent with, the new order that he was bringing. In summing up this teaching, Jesus goes on to say 'So whatever you want people to do to you, do just that to them. Yes; this is what the law and the prophets are all about' (Matthew 7, 12).

Jesus' message at this point was addressed to Israel, challenging his own contemporaries. God had called Israel to be the salt of the earth – bringing to the earth purity, preserving it from corruption and lending flavour to life through their positive spirit, even in the face of adversity. Instead, Israel, with its power politics, its factional struggles and its militant revolutions, was behaving like everyone else. Jerusalem, the city on a hill, was supposed to be a beacon of light and hope to the world, had become part of the darkness. How could God keep the world from going bad if Israel, his chosen 'salt', had lost its savour, and its intended light had been extinguished by darkness?

What Jesus said to his contemporaries can be applied to all Christians, past and present. We are challenged to be the salt and light wherever the world needs it – individually in our local home communities and perhaps further afield, and collectively as a force for good in the wider

world. What does this mean in practice? It challenges us to try and maintain standards of honesty and conscientiousness in our work and in all our dealings, and think carefully about difficult moral issues: certainly not to withdraw from the world but to engage in and with it in the light of Jesus' life and teaching. But today the most obvious quality of salt is that it lends flavour to things. So Christianity should add flavour to life. It is a sad reflection on how it is misunderstood, even by some Christians as well as by those outside the church, and is connected with the very opposite things – with narrowness, with restriction, with joylessness. In fact we are bidden to be *diffusers of joy*: people who can be positive in the midst of adversity, people who can help to lift up the spirits of those around us by the way we live our lives and relate to others. Jesus came that we might have life, and have it more abundantly.

Jesus challenges us to be the light of the world – not to produce our own light, but to reflect his. It is a light that is meant to be seen – if the early Christians had maintained secrecy in their discipleship, how would the Christian faith have grown? For some Christians today mere visibility, even in worship, is a very costly demand, as we know from the experience of some in Pakistan, Iran and Iraq for example. But our light is not to be confined to the church: it is for the world. This does not necessarily mean crude evangelisation, which may be inappropriate or counter-productive in societies like our own that consider themselves post-Christian. What it does mean is visibility in the ordinary activities of life and work – in the way we speak to those who serve us or work for us, in the way we drive a car, in how we relate to others in the office or on the factory floor, in voluntary roles, in political life, or if we find ourselves in hospital. St. Augustine famously said that the Christian life could be summed up in one phrase: 'Love God, and do as you like.' Put like that, it sounds so easy – until we reflect on the love for us shown by God through Jesus. That is the love that we are challenged to reflect in our lives. When compared with observing even the minutiae of all the Scribal laws, to live a truly Christian life is a challenge of an altogether different order.