

God's Law of Love

A sermon preached by the *Revd Viv Bridges* at the 10.00am service at St Peter's, Wolvercote on Sunday 6th February 2011

1 Corinthians 2.1-12, Matt.5.13-20

As I read through our readings for today I was somewhat comforted to read verses 2 & 3 of the passage from Corinthians (*while I was with you, I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling*) to realise that St Paul had felt the same as I usually do ... approaching the lectern in weakness and fear and much trembling, aware that my sermons were not plausible words of wisdom!

But, of course, **Paul** goes on to say that HIS words, in spite of not being 'worldly' wise, were demonstrations of the spirit and of power. So our prayer at the start of preparing sermons should be that we remain open to the Holy Spirit, working sometimes through the words of the bible readings, sometimes through the things that other people have written about them, sometimes through our own experiences of life and sometimes in quiet, listening to the inspiration the Spirit can bring.

For me, preparing a sermon is always difficult, but is inevitably sometimes more difficult than others because so many of the things that Jesus did, and the words he spoke seem to go against human reason. God's wisdom can seem so secret, sheer foolishness. And at times, Jesus' words and deeds seem to contradict each other and we have an example of this today. Jesus had openly disobeyed the Jewish Law many times, and yet he said 'I have come to FULFIL the Law'. How foolish this must have sounded to the devout Jews of his time. So what could Jesus have meant?

To try to answer this we have to try to discern what Jesus meant by 'The Law' compared with what the scribes and Pharisees meant. For the Jews 'the Law' could mean different things; the 10 commandments, the first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch), and they spoke of 'the Law and the Prophets' when referring to the whole of Scripture. There was also the ORAL or Scribal law and it was this law that was commonly used in Jesus' time ... and that he condemned bitterly. The Jews believed that the Ten Commandments, dictated by God himself, set the principles for everything in life, but because they contain no specific rules and regulations, a group of men The Scribes took it upon themselves to try to work out a rule to cover every single possible situation in life. Regarding God's commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy, William Barclay says 'the scribes spent endless hours arguing whether a man could or could not lift a lamp from one place to another on the Sabbath ... if a woman might wear a brooch or false hair, even if a man might go out on the Sabbath with artificial teeth or an artificial limb.

And concerning HEALING (which was forbidden on the Sabbath), it was permitted to do something if someone was in danger of losing their life, but only just enough to keep them alive ... nothing could be done to try to make them better. So a plain bandage could be put on a wound, but no ointment could be applied, a plain wadding could be applied to an infected ear, but no medication.

Of course this all seems ridiculous to us, but we might sometimes wonder if we are in danger of something similar in our society today – with Health and Safety regulations that forbid a policeman to go into a river to save a drowning man because he hasn't got the correct life-saving certificate, or that insist that packets of peanuts or brazil nuts carry the notice WARNING ... CONTAINS NUTS.

So the Scribes devoted themselves to formulating all these often petty rules and regulations and the Pharisees separated themselves from ordinary life to try to keep every one of them. So it's easy to see that their focus had been shifted away from love of God, to love of the Law itself. They were concerned with being seen to be doing the right thing ... 'righteousness' was a question of action, rather than heart, leaving no room for mercy and compassion.

This, then, was the law that Jesus constantly broke, because the Law that he had come to fulfil was God's original Law Of Love! It may seem that this Law, with few rules and regulations, would be a lot easier to abide by, but it isn't. A law based on love means that EVERYTHING we do, must be done with love. We have never 'finished' ... never ticked all the boxes ... we don't just 'NOT KILL' we must actually try to love our enemy. We don't just 'bind' wounds, we bind them with ointment, and with tenderness. It's not just a question of doing the right thing, we must do it lovingly. Our righteousness must exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees.

Jesus gave us some examples of the way in which we should fulfil this law of love. He says we should be like salt. Salt has a number of uses; it purifies and preserves. As much as we can we must try to live 'pure' lives ... try not to succumb to the ways of the world, then we can be an example to others and preserve decent values. But more than this, salt gives flavour, so we must bring something extra to life. People have sometimes preached that it's impossible to be pure AND enjoy life. This isn't what Christ intends ... we must not let our faith make us stale, boring, rather it should make us more alive and joyful.

In the same way, Jesus says we should not hide the light we have received from him ... we should try to spread that light and joy to all the people we meet. Christ told us that one way to spread light and joy is in doing good works, but we have to be careful. It can be tempting to think that, as long as we DO do 'good things' then we are automatically being good Christians. But if we do them so that people can say how wonderful we are we are doing them for ourselves, not for God. St John of the Cross said that 'The Christian should realise that the value of his or her good works does not depend on their quantity or their quality, but on the LOVE OF GOD which he or she brings to them'. Our good works should glorify our Father in heaven, not our own egos.

But it's often very difficult to know exactly what God does want us to do, and so we come back to what I said earlier about preparing sermons ... we have to work hard at remaining open to the Holy Spirit ... in ALL we do. Paul recognised that this was the only way for us to understand the meaning of Jesus' actions and words, the only way to understand the wisdom of God which seems foolishness to the world. For it is certainly NOT the wisdom of the world that God should have become a human being, suffered and died on a cross for people who were sinners and come back to life after lying in a tomb for 3 days. By the world's standards it is irrational, foolish, that Christ can inspire and strengthen ordinary human beings to actions of great selflessness, to put other people first, to put away the search for wealth and status, to show love even to people who hate them, to forgive those who have hurt them.

But these things are the wisdom of God, brought into being through the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

So if we are to fulfil God's law of love ... showing mercy, compassion, forgiveness, we need to make sure that we make time in our lives to try to listen to the Holy Spirit, to allow the Spirit in. It doesn't matter how we do it; reading the Bible, saying a daily office, spending time pondering an icon, or something in nature, taking time to simply SIT in God's presence ... it's vital that we do something that allows us to turn aside from the distractions of 'The World' and open our hearts and minds to the Spirit. Paul reminds us of the wonderful things that God wants for us ... 'what no eye has seen nor ear heard nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him he reveals through the Spirit'. When we allow the Spirit in to our lives then we understand the wonderful gifts God bestows on us, and we understand how to use those gifts to be salt and light to those around us.

Amen