

Third Sunday of Lent – 3 March 2024

Message – Law, Lore, Love and Grace

Creator, Redeemer and Giver of Life, revealed to us through creation and the Eternal Word, open our hearts and minds, ears and eyes, to your love and grace. **Amen.**

There are a rich array of themes running through today's readings. I hope that you have made some of the connections as you heard the readings and that you will take the time to reflect on them not least because you certainly don't want me to try to preach on all of them this morning!

Though we talk of the law of the Hebrew Scriptures, it is only part of the lore, 'l', 'o', 'r', 'e', of those scriptures. The books of the law, has many rules, all contained within a larger narrative, which gives us context to those laws.

Within the oldest commentary on the Hebrew Scriptures, the Talmud, to which a range of highly respected rabbis contributed, there is a debate between those who place an emphasis on Halakhah, law, and those who emphasise Aggadah, story. The respectful debate discloses the priorities and passions of the individual rabbis, something from which we should learn. We are all trying to faithfully follow Christ. It is our life experiences and predispositions that will lead us to different conclusions not our faithfulness.

A member of the congregation suggested that I am not biblical in my understanding of the Christian faith. I am certainly not literal in my interpretation of the Bible but I do not believe that that means I am not biblical.

As a starting point, the Bible contains things that are contradictory. Even from the New Testament there are rules we don't follow. Most Christians accept that the early church was evolving and working out what it meant to be a faithful follower of the way. Given how much our understanding of the world has changed since then, it is reasonable that our understanding of what it means to be a faithful follow of the way will have changes a little too.

All of us are interpreting the Bible through a set of lenses peculiar to ourselves. We certainly don't follow all the Hebrew law so we must, for example, tread carefully if we are going to rely on that law for something that we claim is a Christian principle. As we heard from St Paul two weeks ago, “*All things are lawful, but not all things are beneficial. 'All things are lawful', but not all things build up.*” What is beneficial and what builds up can change with context.

The Bible is revealing to us God who is a mystery beyond our comprehension. If we believe that interpretation is easy, we have probably misunderstood. We must be prepared to wrestle with the texts of the Bible and allow them to truly speak to us, slowly recognising our assumptions, which may not be founded in the text, engaging in a spiral in which we return to the text again and again, bringing new insights and experiences each time and hearing the text afresh and with greater perception each time.

The ten commandments, which are possibly twelve commandments depending on where you think the commandments split, seem foundational to the Hebrew Law. Yet, there is a deeper more fundamental foundation than the commandments.

The first commandment in the Talmud is '*I am the LORD your God*'. This is the foundation for the commandments. It expresses the existence of a relationship between God and humanity. Before the Law came relationship.

Religion can too easily become a matter of following a set of laws and rituals without remembering their meaning. Yet, when we remember their meaning, those laws and rituals can become a path to fullness of life. Every act in our service, whether intended or not, conveys meaning. The same is true of our lives.

There seems to be a human tendency to default to obeying God's rules without considering their purpose and meaning. The rules are a way of expressing a loving relationship with God. Christ came to show us what that looks like in the life of an ordinary person. Christ was not in any kind of disguise when he was walking among us on earth. Rather, we have to realise how extraordinary God is. We have to realise that God does not conform to our ideas of what it means to be all powerful if you are also all loving.

God does not feel some desperate urge to demonstrate the nature of omnipotence. Doing so would crush us and remove any possibility of a real relationship with God. '*I am the LORD your God*' and I will walk with you, love you, and offer you fullness of life. All of which, as Kim notes in *view from the pews* is contrary to the thinking of Hellenists and Jews, though for different reasons.

It is, to some degree, probably contrary to our own thinking too that God would freely choose to be one of us. This is our God, the servant sovereign. Yet, even in that apparent

humility we find that all is not as we might expect. The Eternal Word is no door mat. Christ stands up to those with power and authority who fail to protect those who do not share their privilege and advantages in life.

In today's gospel reading, which is from John's gospel, contrary to the service sheet, we have Christ standing up to the authorities. The synoptic gospels and John place Christ's clearing of the temple at opposite ends of his ministry. We do not know whether Christ cleared the temple once or twice, both are possible. The reasons given are different, which could reflect different occasions or different purposes behind recounting the events. We do not know.

In John's gospel, this passage is the only real anticipation of Christ's death. John keeps on expanding the way in which we understand various symbols. At some level we know that God does not dwell in the temple or in any particular Church. In this narrative Christ reveals to us that God dwells in Christ and, as the body of Christ, in us. It is the people who are the home of God, not a building.

Not only is this a messianic proclamation but it also gives a foundation for the Zeal that burned in Christ. The people were there in the court of the gentiles to pray. Now many of us are prone to getting a little techy when our silent prayers are interrupted in church. Imagine how we would be if the only place we could pray had been turned into a marketplace.

Jesus's response is measured. He doesn't take anything away from anyone, he doesn't set the birds free, as tempting as that might have been. But he does act with what most of us

would recognise as righteous anger. So, it is interesting that anger remains one of the seven deadly sins or capital vices.

Yet, is anger always wrong. There has been a long tradition in the church recognising that it is more complicated than that. Thomas Aquinas (13C), considered one of the greatest medieval philosopher-theologians, in the *Summa Theologiae* quotes St John Chrysostom (4C), *'The one who is angry without cause, shall be in danger; but the one who is angry with cause, shall not be in danger: for without anger, teaching will be useless, judgments unstable, crimes unchecked.'* (Question 158)

In this simple gospel incident, we have an illustration of the limitations of law. Described, without context, we would think that Christ's actions were threatening and hurtful. Placed in context, we see the actions as entirely lawful and appropriate. We always need context, we need Halakhah, law, and, Aggadah, story.

Though St Paul says, *'All things are lawful'*, he is quoting and being a bit mischievous. He is pointing out that not all things are lawful because Christ has revealed the law of love in word and in action. We have just one law, Love God, and Love our neighbour as ourselves.

In Christ, the law has been rewritten. We are to love and keep loving as Christ loves us, even in the midst of our failures. It does seem like foolishness but we also know that there is no counter argument to love. It is God's final word.

May God give us humility, grace, and courage, so that we may love the lovable and unlovable alike, and reveal the light of Christ to all creation. Amen. Amen.