Sunday 3rd October 2021

Matthew 5, 17-20

Following on to the end of Psalm 19

“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord my rock and redeemer.”

It used to be common at the beginning of sermons to hear that phrase from the end of Psalm 19 but I hear it rarely now. Is it because it sounds rather patronising or conceited? We need to be reminded it follows on from the extract from Psalm 19 that we read together about the Law of the Lord being Perfect.

While it comes glibly off the tongue, just what is the Law that Jesus is referring to that he has come to fulfil? We are surrounded by laws. We need to be very clear in this context what Jesus means as it is far from clear except in the context of the rest of the Sermon on the Mount.

When I was a teenager I had a tape recorder and I used to tape music from the then Third Programme (yes it was a bit rarefied and I was hooked on composers like John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Luciano Berio etc.) However, at the other extreme I taped performances of Gilbert and Sullivan including the comic opera Iolanthe. The plot is crazy involving a group of fairies interacting with the male members of the House of Lords. At one stage the Lord Chancellor is trying to decide whether he can allow himself to marry a young female ward of court called Phyllis. The song he sings starts with this phrase: “The Law is the true embodiment of everything that's excellent. It has no kind of fault or flaw, and I, my Lords, embody the Law.”

While this comic situation is absurd it does ask the question, what do we mean by the law? Is it summed up by the chief law officer of the UK? Clearly in the context which Jesus refers to, definitely not.

Almost every area of life has laws, from the laws governing sport such as cricket, laws about property, scientific laws and many more. Recently I have been giving talks on the subject of “Learning to be ignorant,” which focuses on the fact that the laws of science are not absolutes, they are approximations to the truth. In the main they are pretty good. Most of us can live with the consequences predicted by Newton’s laws for most of our lives. The fact that they break down under certain circumstances is not an issue for us. Like other so-called laws they are open to interpretation and definition of their limits.

There is one possible exception to this which I was introduced to at school via some lectures given by Sir George Porter, the Nobel prize winner. These talks were entitled “The laws of disorder” and I still have the booklet that came with those lectures. These are the laws of thermodynamics, that describe the relationship between energy and heat. In a recent book entitled “Einstein’s Fridge” about the history of thermodynamics, there is a quote from Einstein: “There is a deep impression that classical thermodynamics made on me. It is the only physical theory of universal content which I believe will never be overthrown.” Perhaps the popular song The Second law of thermodynamics, by Flanders and Swann express this better.

Heat cannot of itself pass from one body to a hotter body  
Heat won't pass from a cooler to a hotter  
You can try it if you like but you far better notter.

Actually, there is some evidence that in the area of black holes even this might not be true.

While there are many areas of law that are open to interpretation, the law that Jesus talks about in our passage is not. It is an absolute law. But what is it? Is it the Torah?

Jewish tradition state that there are 613 commandments in the Law of Moses, the Torah. Others quote 413 and 611. Whichever number you choose several relate directly to the Temple which cannot apply today as there is no physical Temple, some others relate to the land of Israel specifically. Surely these are not what Jesus is referring to. However, they were what the religious leaders of his day were obsessed by.

Before we go further we must understand the radical position that Jesus puts forward from the beginning to the end of the Sermon on the Mount. He turns many ideas on their head starting with the opening beatitudes, moving into the nature of murder, divorce. He uses the phrase “you have heard it said…but I say to you.” So much of what he says in these chapters revolves around the total misuse of their understanding of the law so that the law itself has become the object to be worshiped.

Bonhoeffer in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount says that Jesus is the only person who understands the law and what it requires. He knows its fulfilment will lead to his death. Bonhoeffer goes on to say that the Law itself is not God and God is not the law in that the law replaces God. That is the sin of Israel. They idolised the law rather than worshiping God. They separated God from his law and left God out of the equation.

We come to the crunch here. The law is about our relationship with God. It goes back to the fundamental covenant between God and humankind. “I will be your God and you will be my people.” It is not just about a set of rules

This is not open to interpretation. Again, back to Bonhoeffer: “God is the giver and Lord of the Law, and is performed only in personal communion with God. Jesus, the Son of God, who alone stands in full communion with God renews the validity of the Law by coming to fulfil the law of the old testament. Jesus is the only one who can fulfil the law, can make the covenant right, indeed a new covenant. His fulfilment of the Law allows us back into this relationship with God.

Jesus if fully aware that the Pharisees are worshipping what they believe is the law by inventing all sorts of rituals and constraints. Jesus ignores the lot, healing on the Sabbath, eating with the dregs of society.

I take an analogy here. Most Monday mornings I go to Sharnbrook to play croquet with a number of retired people. We have great fun and joke when one of us breaks a rule normally forgiving the breach. However, there is another person in another group who is obsessed by the exact compliance with the rules even though they do not really matter. No one wants to play with him since for him, the rules are more important that the relationship with the other players.

There is a major message for us here. Over the centuries Christians have become obsessed with observance of rituals, just a read of the letters’ pages in the Church Times weekly will confirm this. In the past theologians have been charged re counting the number of angels on pin heads.

For many Christians today, legalism has replaced relationship with Jesus. However, all have sinned and fallen short. As soon as we condemn any particular act we condemn ourselves. Francis Schaeffer used to say we have become obsessed with social guilt, what others will think of us but we forget that before God we are all morally guilty, our relationship with God is broken if Jesus does not fulfil the law on our behalf. Through the cross he restores our relationship. Again, Schaeffer used to say Christianity is “the cross plus nothing.” So here is what is taken to be Jesus’ teaching on how we should live and behave, we find the centrality of the cross. It is no accident that Jesus says these words at this very point. They are the pivot for what has gone before and what follows.

Does this mean we condone everything going on around us without judgement? No, when the Pharisees challenged Jesus on what is the greatest commandment in the law, he replies:

“Love the Lord your God with all you heart, with all your soul, with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: love your neighbour as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Love, central to a relationship is what this is all about. Loving your neighbour means that stealing, coveting, unsocial behaviour and many other actions are not acceptable. In the general confession we admit our failure of those things we have done and those not done that are unacceptable, and there is no health in us. The prayer goes on to ask that the relationship with God is restored.

Many of you will have had personal experiences of human relationships breaking down and the consequences that follow. However painful this is, it is nothing to the breakdown of a relationship with God himself. Thus, we desperately need the fulfilling of the law and restoration that Jesus has bought by his death and resurrection.

As we go on through the Sermon on the mount we will be constantly challenged to rethink what our faith means. Jesus turns everything around. Just being angry is equivalent to murder, love your enemies, don’t pray like the hypocrites, don’t worry about the future, do not judge. And so the list goes on.

In finishing I am going to jump ahead to the text that was preached at my confirmation a long time ago. After Jesus finishes the Sermon on the Mount he sends the disciples out to explore the freedom that his fulfilment of the law gives. The verse was from chapter 10 v 8 “Freely you have received, freely give.” Jesus’ fulfilment of the law allows us to do just this. It is a statement of liberation, not to worry, to share what we have been given. Isn’t that wonderful.