

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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Rector of St James

Sixth Sunday of Easter

9 May 2021

Readings: Acts 10: 44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5: 1-12; John 15: 9-17.

“The Law of Love”

Law Versus Grace

“Anything in the seas or the streams that does not have fins and scales, ... they are detestable to you and detestable they shall remain. Of their flesh you shall not eat, and their carcasses you shall regard as detestable.” (Leviticus 11: 10-12)

The book Leviticus, in the Hebrew Scriptures, provided a set of laws by which the people of God were to live. These laws are extensive and cover foods that can be eaten, the treatment of women, health and hygiene, the practice of religion, and much more. These laws were much loved by the Pharisees of Jesus' time, and continue to be loved by Christians who are committed to a legalistic approach to faith. Yet, this devotion creates spiritual dissonance for many people.

I must confess that I am very partial to eating oysters, prawns, and other shellfish, so am I breaking God's law by doing so? Indeed, am I an unrepentant sinner because I do not follow the rules as laid down in Leviticus?

Today's reading from Acts of the Apostles is part of the story where it all changed. The context of the passage is the occasion when the apostle Peter visited the house of a Centurion called Cornelius. Cornelius was a Gentile (or non-Jew) but was also known as a 'God-fearer' because he was sympathetic to Judaism. But visiting him was a problem for Peter, because under the law Jews were not meant to associate with Gentiles in this way. Gentiles were identified as being 'unclean' - rather like shellfish.

The situation troubled Peter and those around him, but God acted to change all this. Peter had a vision in which God declared all foods pure and, by extension, all people as being acceptable to God. Ritual laws were therefore set aside for the salvation of all people. Peter visited Cornelius during which time the Holy Spirit entered the lives of the Gentiles present, and these converts were subsequently baptised.

Yet, this event created controversy in the early church because it challenged the exclusive nature of Judaism, which at that time included the followers of Jesus.

Born Again!

The New Testament uses the phrase ‘born again’ to describe the conversion experience of becoming a follower of Jesus. It is an effective image because it illustrates how dramatically people’s lives can be changed by turning to Christ. The First Letter of John extends the metaphor to describe this change as becoming a ‘child of God’, similar to how Jesus was a ‘son of God’.

What happens when we come into such a special relationship with God? The Letter states that we will ‘love God and keep his commandments’. Keeping commandments, however, sounds like yet another set of rules for us to follow – a return to Leviticus. But it is not, and I will come back to this.

There is a curious reference in the Letter of John to ‘the testimony of Spirit, water, and blood’. It is, however, straightforward. The ‘testimony of blood’ is a reminder of Jesus’ humanity and his dying on the cross, and the ‘testimony of water’ is a reminder of his baptism and being blessed by the Holy Spirit, and finally the ‘testimony of the Spirit’ is the ongoing operation of God in the world through the Holy Spirit, present in the followers of Jesus, even today. The testimony is therefore one of Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and resurrection, followed by the Pentecostal experience of the Spirit.

It is reasonable to extend the image of water and blood to remind us of the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, which are formative in the outworking of our faith. Part of the business of following Jesus is the need to identify with him by faith, including participation in the life of the church that continues his ministry today. This is eternal life, not so much a ‘pie in the sky when you die’ concept but rather an activity based in the here and now, as well as the future, on continuing Jesus’ ministry in the world.

The Commandment of Love

But back to the commandments. Jesus gave his followers a new commandment, which is to ‘love one another as he loved us’. Love (or ‘grace’ in theological parlance) is central to the Christian faith and is often contrasted with ‘law’. Yet, the idea of love can be a difficult one because the word has many meanings and nuances.

Some of you will be familiar with the experience of being loved ‘through gritted teeth’ – a type of love that judges and condemns a person while saying ‘despite who you are, I will still love you’ – hoping that by loving someone when it hurts will fill them with guilt. It is occasionally framed as ‘speaking the truth in love’ but, of course, such behaviour is not love at all; it is not alluring, it is not winsome, it is a power game.

If we want to understand the new commandment, we need to look at the life of Jesus who came not to condemn the world but save it. It involved laying down his life for others. It is therefore not a matter of applying rules but rather an issue of self-sacrifice.

From my experience, I have come to understand love as requiring us to be focussed on the wellbeing of others without expecting anything in return; and it is worked out by addressing people's physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs. It is therefore a holistic thing directed toward both the individual and the common good.

Institutions need rules and regulations to structure their operations and keep them centred on achieving good outcomes; but they are a means to an end. Problems arise when the application of the rules becomes an end in itself. For example, when a rich young man came to Jesus seeking eternal life and boasted that he had kept all the commandments, Jesus shifted his attention away from the law to a transformative challenge that required him to give away his wealth (Matthew 19:16-22). In this instance, grace was not palatable to the young rule-keeper.

Likewise, the writer of the Letter to the Galatians contrasts the effects of living our lives either based on law or on love. It is described as a choice between seeking to fulfil selfish desires or living for the benefit of others. The proof of godliness is not the keeping of law but rather what love manifests, as can be seen in the description of the fruits of the Spirit: 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things'(Galatians 5: 22-23).

Good News for All

It was a shock for the early church to realise that God's love was directed to all humanity and not only to the Jews. The boundaries created by the 'chosen ones' were overcome by the Gospel, and they still need to be overcome in our church today.

Peter, himself, was hesitant about going to a Gentile's house because it crossed the boundaries, causing him to become ritually unclean. Yet, God was doing a new thing. Exclusion had become a religious practice exercised by those who had decided they were in God's favour while others were not; but God was being inclusive.

The Holy Spirit acts to draw people to God and we are called to assist in that process. It is an activity that transcends the boundaries of religious rigidity and exclusivism. Religious institutions often get this wrong because they are more concerned about maintaining purity, order, and control rather than bringing freedom and renewal.

Like Peter, when we are actively participating in the ministry of Christ, we can be surprised by the God who transcends division. As I remember the Catholic Bishop of Bougainville saying to me regarding my part in support of the local community of faith: "the needs of the people must take precedence over the needs of the institution".

Thank God that the Spirit blows where it pleases to overcome human divisions, be they based on age, race, sexual orientation, or religion. And by the way, ...enjoy your prawns and oysters!