

I am not a fan of TV soaps, with one exception – Neighbours. I got into that because it immediately follows the BBC news at lunchtime, which I watch while I am having my snack. Of course, the fact that it has some gorgeous girls may also have something to do with it. At the present time there is the story line of an older teenager, who has bought his first car, and has had an accident while racing it on the public roads against another lad. He has been arrested and faces a time in prison. To pay the legal costs of a barrister, his parents are having to sell their house. So they are standing by him, but the father is deliberately making things difficult for the boy because he feels that he must learn at an early age the consequence of irresponsible actions. The mother, however, has a quiet word with her husband, explaining that the son has already learned that lesson only too well – he can see the devastation he has caused the family and what he needs now is not condemnation but love and acceptance.

There is a sense in which that scenario depicts the situation between our two readings this morning; although I wouldn't want to push it too far. You see, Paul was a Jew and a particular sort of Jew, he was a Pharisee. The great pride of the Jew is that it is his race which has been given the law of God. Other nations have to discover, as best they can, how to live their lives; but God has chosen the Jews to receive his revelation of what he requires of humankind. "Obey these laws of God and you will live." The basic laws, of course are the Ten Commandments, but they are in general terms. For instance, the Sabbath day is to be kept holy and no one is to work. But how do you define work? So the Rabbi's would meet and discuss for hours every facet of the law and interpret it for the common people in the various daily situations they would face. You didn't have to remain literally in one place on the Sabbath, but if you went on a journey, that was work. All right, so how far *could* you walk without it becoming work? So they defined the length of a Sabbath's journey; and so on. Now Paul was involved in that sort of thing; he described

himself as a Pharisee of the Pharisees. It was this that caused him such anger when he first met up with Christians. They were preaching the message that all you had to do was to believe in Jesus and you would have eternal life – no question of having to keep the law. But the law of God was Paul's pride and joy; he had devoted his life to studying and interpreting it. It was essential to put a stop to this dangerous heresy and when he heard that the Christian cult was gaining ground in Damascus, he got authority from the hierarchy in Jerusalem to go up there and stamp it out. On the way there he had a blinding encounter with the risen Jesus who actually spoke to him and told him that in persecuting the Christians he was persecuting him. He ordered Paul to continue to Damascus and there he was to receive the ministrations of a Christian named Ananias and then he would be told what he must do.

So Paul became a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ – he couldn't do anything else, he had met with him. However, that caused Paul a problem; what about the law? Was the whole revelation of God to the Jews in the past to be discounted? Was the whole of his own life, keeping and studying the law, useless? How could God by-pass the law? He was a righteous God, a God of justice. So for many months Paul was in a sort of retreat, trying to work it out. And he *did* work it out; he saw the truth. Yes, God *was* righteous, he *did* desire (no, demand) that the law should be kept, the wicked did have to be punished, in fact they had to be put to death –

The soul who sins is the one who will die. (Ezek.18:20)

Then it hit Paul, the law had been satisfied but it wasn't the soul who had sinned who died, it was Jesus. He had died in our place. If you are caught speeding in your car and you are fined and someone pays that fine on your behalf, that is the end of the matter. So far as the law is concerned the fine has been paid; anything after that is a matter between you and the person who has paid it. God is still just, he hasn't abandoned the law, but has fulfilled its requirements himself. Let me read again part of our first lesson:

God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished - he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. (Rom. 3:25 ff.)

There is a sense in which Paul is like the father in the scene I described from Neighbours. He will stand by his son in public, but within the family he will make certain the son learns his lesson and realises the enormity of what he has done. Paul rejoices in the gospel, he appreciates he has been set free of the law but only because he understands that the law has been satisfied by the death of Jesus. Now that is a very important point of doctrine. It is gloriously true that Jesus has saved us. But Paul is still the lawyer he is looking at salvation with the mind of a lawyer – that is, as a Jewish Pharisee. And that is natural enough for that is who he is.

However, we, you and I, are not Jewish Rabbis. Hopefully we have a sense of right and wrong, but the law is not to us what it was to Paul. And so I want to turn to the final words of our second lesson; the gospel of Matthew.

When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law. (Matt. 7:28)

What Matthew is getting at here is this. We are not under the law, we follow a person, Jesus Christ. When we want to know how to live life, how to behave, we do not go to a written code of practice – not even the Bible – we go to a living Lord.

Now that doesn't mean that we are free to make up our own mind about what to do and what is right and wrong. That is the way of the present age and has become known as postmodernism. That philosophy holds that there are no absolutes but rather each person

makes up his own mind about what he or she wants to believe and each sets his or her own standards. In fact, of course, that isn't modern or post-modern at all. We find it described in the Old Testament:

In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes. (Judges 17:6)

And it is the same today, unless Jesus is installed as king of a person's heart he or she will do what is right in their own eyes. But the Old Testament has a comment on that in the book of Proverbs:

All a man's ways seem right to him, but the LORD weighs the heart. (Prov. 21:2)

So, no, just because we are not under the law, that doesn't mean that we are free to make up our own mind about right and wrong and thus do whatever we like. We *are* under authority, but it is the authority not of the Bible but of the God, the Lord, who lies *behind* the Bible. As we heard in our gospel reading:

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."

To put it in a nutshell, we do not have to obey a written law; but we seek to please a loving Lord. As Jesus told his disciples:

If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching... He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. (John 14:23/4)

It is as simple as that. If we love Jesus we will do as he asks, and if we don't, we won't.

Of course, that raises a problem. How do we *know* what he wants? With the Bible it is clear; it is written for us to see. It may be difficult to *do* what the Bible states, but it is written there for us to know what it is. How can we know what Jesus wants? Well, how do you know what *anyone* wants, what *anyone* is thinking? By spending time with them. Do you make certain that you spend time

every day with Jesus? This is where the Bible does come into its own. We learn from the Bible who Jesus was; I mean what sort of person he was, how he acted and reacted. With every situation we meet we have to ask ourselves, “What would the Jesus I see in the Scriptures do in the situation I am facing at the moment?” And we need to talk it through with him in prayer.

Two weeks ago we celebrated Pentecost when we thought about the coming of the Holy Spirit. Listen to what Jesus told his disciples about the work of the Holy Spirit:

The Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. (John 14:26)
(and...) he will guide you into all truth. (John 16:13)

You see, when Jesus returned to heaven, he didn't abandon us as orphans, he sent his Holy Spirit to be in us and to direct our minds. He doesn't *replace* our minds but, as we use them to think things through in our desire to please him, he directs them. Paul has experienced this in his own life and so, in his letter to the Corinthians, he actually says, “We have the mind of Christ.” Of course, very often what we believe Jesus wants us to do and what the Bible says, will be one and the same thing – only occasionally will it differ; and then it isn't because the Bible is wrong, but because our situation is not identical to the one we are reading about in Scripture.

I wonder if I have managed to convey to you what I am on about. I realise that in my Christian life, for years I was putting myself under the law. What does the Bible say I must do? What does the law of God say? But as my relationship with Jesus has grown, I realise that it isn't so much a matter of keeping a law as walking with a *person* and seeking to please him. The actual result of what I do, how I live, may not be very different; but my personal attitude has altered. I don't feel so condemned when I fail. It isn't that I have broken the law and have come under judgement; rather I feel upset and ashamed

because I have hurt a friend who has done so much for me. But I am able to express my sorrow and ask him to forgive me.

To go back to my illustration from Neighbours; the father feels he must make the son feel guilty so that he will learn a lesson. The mother says that he has already learned that lesson and is ashamed that he has brought so much trouble on the family. Paul's line in Romans is, "You have broken the law, but at tremendous cost to himself God has found a way to satisfy the law and you won't be punished, you have been saved."

Our Gospel reading from Matthew records that Jesus said:

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man that built his house on the rock... But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand.

I don't want to push it too far because in Scripture the word foolish carries a heavier meaning than we give to it, but instead of looking on our failures as sinfulness Jesus sees them as stupidity. Don't misunderstand what I am saying; I am not saying that they are *not* sinful, they are. But Jesus sees us as stupid and silly sheep who have gone astray. The end result may be the same; we will be lost. But it is a matter of relationship not law. It is the difference between seeing God as the almighty policeman up in the sky or as the loving Lord, who says to us, "You are making things so difficult for yourself because you are living life the wrong way. Stop being so wilfully foolish. Turn round and come with me and I will show you what life is meant to be."

I just want to set you free from the sort of religious legalism which I realise I was under and which some sections of the church seem to want to put people under today. "You miserable sinner, repent and accept the redemption Jesus won for you by dying on the cross."

And let me say clearly, I do not deny that; there is a vital truth in that approach. What I am saying is that having *accepted* my salvation, I no longer go around in fear of condemnation in case I step outside the law of God. Rather, I walk with a very dear friend, who knows that I am not yet perfect, but who apparently enjoys my company and who is thrilled with the progress I have made so far; and is delighted to help me go on growing more and more like him – however far there still is for me to go.