

## **Bible Sunday, Year A (=Last Sunday after Trinity)**

**Nehemiah 8.1-4a, 8-12 • Psalm 119.9-16 • Matthew 24.30-35**

**St Luke's, Chelsea**

**29 October 2023**

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There's not much love lost in our world today for lawyers. Go online and you can find a whole host of lawyer jokes (example: What's the difference between a lawyer and God? Answer: God doesn't think he's a lawyer.) Even in the Bible, it's a conversation with a lawyer that causes Jesus to tell the parable of the Good Samaritan. (And you might read the lawyer's question – 'who is my neighbour?' – as a classic lawyer loophole-exploring moment.)

But there's also not much love lost in lots of the world today for faith. And one of the stereotypical ways of condemning the life of faith is to say that it's all about following laws. 'Look at those Ten Commandments pinned to the east wall of the church', someone might say. And, going on, they might add: 'why do you choose those, and ignore all those rules against wearing clothes made from different fabrics'<sup>1</sup> or mixing milk and meat<sup>2</sup>? And of course, some traditional models of Sunday School and school assembly haven't helped. It's all too easy for children to be taught the faith as if it's just another way of telling them to be nice to their brother or sister. And when faith is seen as just a body of rules to learn and follow, it's hardly surprising that it seems rather dry, and hierarchical. I hope our children in Sunday School are learning to be nice to others, but I hope that's not all they're learning!

So today, this Bible Sunday, seems as good a time as any to ponder the way that law – or, in Hebrew, 'Torah' – features in our scriptures. Because our Old Testament reading from the Book of Nehemiah features a seminal moment in biblical history. Soon after the Jewish people have returned from exile in Babylon to Jerusalem, they gather in the square near the ruins of their temple. The priest Ezra brings out the 'book of the law of Moses'.

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<sup>1</sup> Lev 19.19; Deut 22.9-1.

<sup>2</sup> Ex 34.26; Ex 23.19; Deut 14.21.

Ezra stands on a specially made wooden platform. And over the course of many hours he reads the book to the people. And at the end, the people go on their way with ‘great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them’.

It's a vivid scene to imagine: the people gathered among the ruins of their once-glorious city, listening once again to their ancient text. Just as Moses came down from Mount Sinai and told the people what God had communicated to him, now Ezra reads what Moses had written.<sup>3</sup>

And what is the ‘book of the law of Moses’ that Ezra reads? We don't know exactly. It's presumably all or part of the scriptures describing the laws that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai. That's part of what Jews and today call the ‘Torah’ – the first five books of the Bible that contain those foundational stories and laws of the Jewish people. And indeed, for observant Jews today, ‘Torah’ refers not just to those five books but to the whole tradition and teaching for living which has developed since in the rabbinic tradition.<sup>45</sup>

And this is an important point. Torah – law – is in the Bible and in modern Judaism far more than just a series of rules. Today's Psalm that we sang together is a beautiful reflection of the role that Torah plays in some of the later Hebrew scriptures.<sup>6</sup> Psalm 119 is the longest chapter of the whole Bible – some 176 verses long. You might well say - thank goodness we only heard a snippet sung! But it is a beautiful meditation on the nature of God's law. That's a theme established in its first verse: ‘Blessed are those that are undefiled in the way, and walk in the law of the Lord.’ And what follows is an acrostic poem, with eight verses for

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<sup>3</sup> The second book of Kings records a similar story before the exile to Babylon. When he was renovating the Temple, King Josiah discovered the ‘Book of the Law’. He had it read before all the people, and is remembered in the scriptures as a good king for following the law. (2 Kings 22-23) Our story today follows a similar pattern. The law is rediscovered. The people go away rejoicing.

<sup>4</sup> John Barton, *A History of the Bible*, (Penguin, 2019), p.72.

<sup>5</sup> And beside Ezra were numerous other priests – our reading showed pity on today's reader by leaving out the verses where they were all named. And these other priests ‘gave the sense’ – that is, they interpreted what Ezra was reading. In the tradition of the later Jewish rabbis this was a moment of translation. The exiles returning from Babylon had come home speaking Aramaic (the language that Jesus would speak), and so experts were needed to translate the Hebrew of the book of Moses for the people. (Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, (OUP, 2014). p.1692; Lens-Sofia Tiemeyer, *Ezra-Nehemiah: Israel's Quest for Identity*, (Bloomsbury, 2017) p.28).

<sup>6</sup> Barton, *History*, p.139 on the idea that Psalm 119 (like Psalms 1 and 19, also concerned with the Torah) is later than many of the other psalms.

each of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. What's more, each verse contains at least one synonym for 'law'. So today's extract, verses 9 to 16, is that of the second letter in the Hebrew alphabet, 'beth'. And within each verse we are invited to ponder the excellence of God's law: 'word', 'commandments', 'word', 'statutes', 'judgements', 'testimonies', 'commandments', 'statutes' and 'word'.

And this is that broader meaning of 'Torah' – a word which perhaps most fully means something like 'guidance' or 'instruction'.<sup>7</sup> Following Torah is the life-giving way to live. It is the path that honours God's covenant with Israel. Law is the antidote to chaos. Indeed, the Old Testament treatment of law is not so distant from how it speaks of 'wisdom', and the stories and sayings for good living that we find within that tradition.<sup>8</sup> One other psalm moves seamlessly from praise of God's creation to praise of Torah. It's a connection that might make the philosophers among us think of the (much later) words on the tombstone of German philosopher Immanuel Kant: 'Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe ... : the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.'<sup>9</sup>

So we are a long way from the distinction that Christians have sometimes made between 'law' and 'grace' – 'law' in that dichotomy being salvation through following rules, and 'grace' being salvation through faith. Jesus insists that he has come not to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfil them (Matt 5.17). In other words, the import of these Old Testament texts is taken up into the new way of life which Jesus lays out for those who follow him.

Just imagine that, in his next dramatic policy announcement, Rishi Sunak declared that he was abolishing all laws. Our society in Britain wouldn't fall apart overnight. Probably. Our shared history, our culture, the institutions that we depend on – all of these would keep us together for some time. But we would quickly discover that having an agreed set of principles for life together, as well as

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<sup>7</sup> 'Torah', in Walter Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith*, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p.217.

<sup>8</sup> John Barton, *A History of the Bible*, (Penguin, 2019), p.84.

<sup>9</sup> Psalm 19. On the Psalm and Kant, see John Cottingham, 'Spiritual Experience: Its Scope, Its Phenomenology, and Its Source', *New Blackfriars* 104:1112, (2023), 415-6.

ways to enforce those principles, was an essential part of our social fabric.

And so it is with the law in our Christian tradition. We may not dwell so much today on the precise details of the Levitical law – one of the earliest decisions of the church was that Christians were no longer bound to keep the letter of these laws. But the church continues to maintain its own body of law, canon law. For instance, it is the Chancellor of this diocese, an ecclesiastical lawyer and KC, who will adjudicate our application for the new statue of Oscar Wilde on Dovehouse Green. The law is part of the way that we shape our life as a society together: protecting one another, especially the weak; imposing duties on one another; forming us to be better people.<sup>10</sup>

‘Heaven and earth will pass away’, promises Jesus in today’s gospel, ‘but my words will not pass away.’ One day there will be no more law, and no more lawyer jokes. But for now, we give thanks for the law, and indeed for all the scriptures. And we pray that as we read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, we may discern the ways of God, and be led into all truth.

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<sup>10</sup> Cf Phil Harris, *An Introduction to Law*, (7<sup>th</sup> edn, 2007). E.g. the Race Relations Act has an educative element.