

Homily (notes) from Canon Philip Dyson
12th February 2023 - 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings (Year A): 1st: Ecclesiasticus 15:16-21. 2nd: 1 Corinthians 2:6-10. **Gospel:** Matthew 5:17-37

One certainty about any government across the world is their law making. Rules and regulations are forever changing. Some remain on the statute book for ever.

I well remember the Headmistress of a Girls Grammar School (now comprehensive) in a rough part of South London telling the girls regularly: ‘the reason you need to have school rules and discipline is to help you acquire some self-discipline in order for you to get on well in life.’

The 1st reading says: ‘If you wish, you can keep the commandments: to behave faithfully is in your power.’ Jesus says in St John’s gospel, ‘If ye love me, keep my commandments.’ (Next week’s Communion Motet is those very words set to music by Thomas Tallis)

So when Jesus says: ‘Do not imagine that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to complete them’ what does he mean by it?

This text is sometimes wrongly used to set Jesus up against the Jewish people, and they against him. That cannot have been Jesus’ intention. He tells his Jewish audience that he has not come to do away with their Law. In fact, he says that ‘nothing will ever happen to it. Not one dot one little stroke will disappear from it until its purpose is achieved.’

The old Law passed down from Moses does not become invalid as time passes. Who could envisage a humane, functioning society without something like the Ten Commandments as its cornerstone?

What Jesus is saying is that we need to reach beyond those commandments - we need to transcend the Law. The Law will always regulate human life and actions, but there is a further ideal to be realised.

In the gospels, Jesus makes it clear that we originate from God, who is our true parent. Because of this, he says, we should be like God. We carry God’s life within us, so we should be “divine” in relation to ourselves, our neighbours, and the whole of creation.

The presence of God’s life within us is the real reason the Law commands us not to kill others or to make them an object of our lust: not to lie about them or steal from them. In other words, we have to love like God loves.

That is quite a challenge. It is the challenge presented by the Beatitudes, the ‘beautiful attitudes’ at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount. The challenge stands before us like a high mountain reaching right up to heaven.

It is here the Law come in to help. The framework of discipline and order that the Ten Commandments provide enables us to scale this mountain inch by inch. Without this discipline, it would be difficult – if not impossible - even to start our ascent.

The Ten Commandments still govern our lives, but Jesus shows us that the Law has to be transcended all the time which is at the core of the Sermon on the Mount. We are required to go beyond what the Law demands.

If we dismiss this as just wishful thinking, totally impossible, we only have to look at Jesus’ life. His is the kind of life we are called to live.

When Jesus says that we should love others and the world as God does, it is not just a question of well-meaning words.

In his own life this love is a hard fact, and he refuses to surrender it. We too are asked and can follow Jesus and his example.