

Sermon at Choral Eucharist, on the Sixth Sunday after Trinity
16 July 2023, 11.15am

The Revd Canon Andrew Loat, Canon in Residence

Isaiah 55: 10-13

Psalms 65

Romans 8: 1-11

Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

What comes into your mind when you hear the phrase, *the law*? A few years ago I was stopped by the Police outside Llandrindod shortly after I had left a roundabout, only to be asked, “Do you know neither of your break lights are working?” I was not aware of it! When they discovered I was the local Vicar they were highly amused; one of their colleagues had pulled over the Chief Constable a couple of hours earlier!

Maybe certain associated phrases arise in your mind, such as *the long arm of the Law*; or words often uttered in exasperation, “*He’s a law unto himself!*” And when the Law is not favourable towards us then the easiest thing is to say, “Well then, *the Law is an ass!*”

Perhaps you can just about remember images of Jack Warner as Dixon of Dock Green on television greeting viewers with his cheery “Evenin’ all” before he recalled a story suitable for family viewing which contained, in all likelihood, a cautionary moral.

It all seems a long time ago, belonging to an era where deference to police and others in authority was the norm. The Law commanded widespread respect.

And ‘respect’ is the attitude towards the Law in Paul’s letter to the Romans, although he was writing to two distinct groups of Christians for whom the word *Law* had different overtones.

For instance, if you were a Christian from a pagan background, then ‘the Law’ would most likely mean Roman Law – the Law that protected the rights of Roman citizens, the Law that set out everyone’s duties, whether citizens or not, such as paying taxes to Caesar. And Roman Emperors would readily use brutal force to impose Roman Law should any nation rebel against their rule. For some of Paul’s recipients, then, ‘the Law’ was closely linked to the imposition of order, and for the few who were Roman Citizens it brought a sense of entitlement.

However, for the Christians in Rome who came from a Jewish background, *the Law* had a very different connotation. Their first thought would be of *the Law of Moses* – the Torah, the Biblical commandments governing personal and public life and worship, along with the traditions that developed around it over the centuries. And with it came a sense of national privilege under God.

For the Jews, however, *Roman law* was oppressive. It meant they had to pay burdensome taxes to Caesar. It made it obvious that they were a conquered people, an occupied country.

What Paul does in his letter to the Romans is to show up the inadequacy of Law, whatever its origins. “Law,” he says, “is good for telling us what is right and what is wrong, but it has no power to make us obey it, so that we *do* the right thing.”

Even the Law of Moses, central to Jewish faith and at many levels something that was attractive to Gentiles for its moral rectitude, is powerless to come to our rescue, says Paul. Only God can save us; only God can forgive us and only God can set us free from the sins which so easily enslave us.

The Apostle says we need the Law of the Spirit of life, which is God’s gift to us in Christ. Roman Law can’t give us what we need, nor can the Law of Moses. Only through Christ, and by living out our identity as we discover it in relationship to Him, can we enjoy spiritual freedom. Not by banging on about being citizens of a great Empire. Not by banging on about being children of Abraham, but by our union with Christ which comes about through faith and baptism, not through Law.

You would have thought that the recipients of his letter, the congregations scattered across Rome, would be leaping for joy at his teaching, and maybe they were. But there’s always part of us which wants to be able to justify ourselves, like the Scribe who asked Jesus about who exactly was his neighbour. And if we want to justify ourselves, then we are putting ourselves again under law, because we are claiming to meet certain moral standards and ideas of ‘uprightness’ to justify ourselves in our own eyes and in the eyes of others.

In a former parish, years ago now, there was a woman who on leaving the local supermarket felt a hand upon her shoulder. She turned around to see one of the shop’s security officers, who asked her to show him her bag. Inside was a bottle of sherry for which she had not paid. “O, I must have put it in without thinking,” she explained, and offered to pay for it then and there. The security officer was not impressed. “I’ve never done anything like that before, I don’t know what must have come over me,” she said, but the shop wanted to press charges. The woman became shirty. “My husband is a respected retired businessman, with many connections in high places. Do you think any magistrate would believe that I meant to steal it?” She could have added that her husband was also high up in the Freemasons, and a Church warden of many years’ standing.

I don’t know what else was said, but I often wonder what was the truth behind that episode. The shop did not take her to court, but my triumphant parishioner had been so keen to be well thought of, to be counted upright in the opinion of others.

Paul says we make ourselves slaves to Law if we seek to justify ourselves. The only way to freedom is through Christ, and the Spirit of life that is ours in union with him.

That means we have to let go of our pride and accept the verdict that all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God. No exceptions. No waivers. But what the Law could not do, what *we* could not do, God has done in sending his Son to die for our sins and to rise again for our justification. *He* is our righteousness, not our good deeds or our perceived blamelessness in the opinion of others.

It's a lesson not that different from the Parable of the Seeds we heard on the lips of Jesus. Like so many of his parables, this one invites its hearers to put themselves into the picture, to decide what sort of soil they are going to be. Because the only soil that counts is the good soil that receives the seed, and persists in welcoming it until finally the seed grows fully and bears fruit.

How much do you want to be part of God's Kingdom?, Jesus is asking the crowds. Or do you like the idea of the Kingdom, but over time the word I have sown will be snatched from your heart and it will just wither away?

And Paul says to the Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome, How much do you want to live in the freedom only Christ can bring? Or will your pride stop you, so you prefer to cling to the appearance of obedience but still remaining slaves to the law of sin and death?

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free ... may we embrace the freedom God has given us in Christ, which is the free gift of his grace. Amen.