

Sermon Notes

**St Mark's Anglican Church
South Hurstville**

**Pentecost 13
26 August 2007**

**Preacher
The Reverend Chris Albany
Rector**

Readings: Jeremiah 1. 4-10; Psalm 71. 1-6; Hebrews 12. 18-29; Luke 13. 10-17

Compassion and obedience

I want to share a few reflections on that Gospel passage we have just heard read.¹ It reveals what can happen if there is too slavish a following of the letter of the law without due regard to what its real purpose is and also a subtle yet crucial difference between Jesus and the leader of the synagogue in their understanding of the nature of God.

This is not a dispute about the importance of law rather it is one of understanding. Jesus, here and through the Gospels is not riding rough-shod over the law and replacing it with new ways. Later people like Paul saw that as the only option when pressed by the problems of expanding the faith into Gentile world. Not so Jesus, at least, not according to Luke and Luke is doubtless reflecting ancient sources which reflect the approach of the historical Jesus. Luke reports that Jesus said: 'It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for stroke of a letter of the Law to be dropped' (16:17). Jesus upheld biblical law. His conflicts were over how to interpret it. But the issue was not argument about specific points, but about the underlying theology of the Law, of Scripture. Such conflicts still play themselves out today in such fundamental questions as: how do we approach the Bible?

The theology which informs Jesus' attitude appears to be diametrically opposed to the theology reflected in the leader of the synagogue. Both would affirm that we must love God with the whole heart and soul and strength and that this needs to show itself in action. For the leader this meant: keeping the commandments. That made sense. Behind it is an image of God saying: I am God. I must be obeyed. I alone deserve your loyalty and service. That also makes sense. The outcome is: we seek to know what God's commands entail, how they apply, and we keep them. Simple as that! Our devotion is reflected in the extent we take that challenge seriously. I could just as easily be describing what many Christians have seen and still see as the universal duty incumbent on all. Is it not also what Jesus himself would have said?

There is a subtle difference. It runs deeply into our assumptions and attitudes. What is God really like? What if God's chief concern is not to be obeyed, but something else? What is God's chief focus is love and care for people and for the creation? Then the focus moves from God's commands to God's people and world. It is as though God is telling us to get our priorities right. Commandments, rules, guidelines, traditions, laws, scriptures are also subordinate to that central purpose: love. They are means to an end. God's focus is not self-aggrandisement as it is with so many who have power and wealth and want to keep it, but generosity and giving, restoration and healing, encouraging and renewing. When any of these means (commandments, laws, scriptures) cease to be seen in that light, they become ends and we find people in absurd conflicts about whether they help someone in need or obey God. When those become alternatives, something has gone terribly wrong, IF you believe God's chief concern is caring concern for people.

The synagogue leader seems to be operating out of thinking that says Commandments are not to be questioned. They have absolute authority because they allegedly come from absolute authority whereas Jesus' basic assumption is that God's will (in the Law as elsewhere) is focused on people's

well being. Elsewhere he states: ‘The Sabbath was made for people; not people for the Sabbath’ (Mark 2:27).

This story is almost a parody of Jesus’ opponents. How absurd to object to someone being made well! How absurd to imagine God would be more worried about having the Sabbath commandment protected than having people healed!

The key issue is alive and well in Christian churches today. Commandments are not, as so often is implied, to be kept just because they are commandments. Unquestioningly given absolute authority because they allegedly come from absolute authority. They need to be looked at alongside the understanding that they are given for people’s well being. So it is equally absurd to think that God is more concerned to protect Paul’s statements about the ministry of women than about women and men each utilizing to the full their gifts and talents in the service of others and so living fulfilled lives; or that God is more concerned about upholding prohibitions against same sex activity than about affirming people in relationships which are mutually sustaining, respectful , just and so life giving.

Jesus spent much of his ministry, it seems, in a struggle to portray a different way of imagining God than that of an aloof King to be obeyed absolutely and a powerful Father somewhat distant and remote. God is not to be modeled on such images but rather on the mother looking for a lost coin and the dad running down the road to meet a lost son. The facades of dignity are dropped in favour of affection and caring. It is a very different model of God and produces a very different way of handling human life and biblical tradition.

Don’t get me wrong both models represented in the story reflect deep devotion. Both in different ways protect some things that are valuable. Both are based on scripture. One is healing. So is the other, but healing is subordinate to other concerns. Jesus reveals for us the compassionate one, whose concerns for people and their well-being and wholeness at every level of their being are never subordinated. May we know and live out the full implications of that reality.

¹ With acknowledgement to UCA Theologian Bill Loaders Web based *Lectionary Resources for the Year of Luke* which form the basis of this sermon.