

## Lent Compline Talks 2015

8 March Prof John Morris

### Conflict with the law

Today we consider Jesus conflicts with the Law – or more specifically the religious lawyers & Pharisees. Some of us may have had brushes with the civil law – I'll own up to occasional traffic and parking ticket - but few of us will have had conflicts with the ecclesiastic authorities. Indeed, unless one is a Giles Fraser caught up in the St Paul's occupation; or a clergyman caught conducting weddings for immigration purposes we wouldn't know about ecclesiastical law and courts. However, you only have to watch Wolf Hall and think of the mediaeval situation; or look to Iran or Saudi where Ayatollah's have superior jurisdiction to civil courts, or Isis to know what it can mean. We must remember that, over the centuries from Moses, Jewish thinkers – especially in exile in Babylon - had built up an ever more elaborate set of rules and regulations about daily life Torah and Mishnah (Simon Sharma)

In Jesus' time there was of course Roman civil rule (we come to that later in Lent) but the religious law was strong and all pervasive on everyday behaviour. So what was Jesus' attitude to it? In Sermon on Mount as recorded in Matthew 5/17 Jesus is very clear "Do not suppose I have come to abolish the Law; I did not come to abolish but to complete. So long as heaven & earth endure not a letter will disappear from the Law ... Unless you show yourselves far better men than the Pharisees and doctors of the law you can never enter the kingdom of heaven." This points up two things: What Jesus stresses all the time is not just the action but what is in the heart and mind "thinking murderous thoughts ..; thinking adulterous thoughts; and even more than that: its not an eye-for-an-eye; do good to those who abuse you. But clearly Jesus did not see most Pharisees and doctors of the law as good examples.

Indeed, the conflict started early in his ministry. In Mark 2 when Jesus was confronted with the paralysed man let down through the roof he said "My son, your sins are forgiven" but the lawyers sitting there murmured "Why does this fellow talks like that? This is blasphemy! Only God can forgive sins" and Jesus, seeing what they were thinking immediately confronts them "Is It easier to say that, or to say stand up, go home; but to convince you – then to he man "Take up your bed ..". And there are plenty of other conflicts in all the gospels: Pharisees complaining that Jesus disciples don't fast according to the law; that they pluck ears of corn on the Sabbath; that he heals on he Sabbath (healing counting as work and work prohibited on Sabbath) and dares to suggest that he is continuing the work of God his father. More than that he is able to give an unanswerable riposte to the Pharisees criticisms and Mark says "But the Pharisees on leaving the synagogue began plotting against him to see how they could do away with him." – so the antagonism was mutual! It is the difference between the letter of the law and what is in the heart that comes again and again. Jesus is asked by the Pharisees "why do you eat with defiled (unwashed) hands". The actual health implications would have been quite unknown at that time, but Jesus response is to call the lawyers hypocrites who follow the letter, but not the spirit of the law; 'you neglect the commandment of God in order to maintain the tradition of men'. In Matt 23 Jesus tells his disciples and the people to 'pay attention to their (the Pharisees) words but do not follow their practice – they say one thing and do another'. He accuses them of being blind guides, stumbling blocks – a vipers' brood.

Another of the Pharisee's criticisms is the company Jesus keeps "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them" to which Jesus replies that it is precisely those who are lost that he has come to save. The unspoken part is of course the Pharisee's view that, because they kept the letter of the law they were sinless.

The Pharisees' were clearly obsessed by in Jesus and his disciples. Repeatedly they came out to engage him in discussion; Nicodemus asks him how it is possible to be born again 'in the spirit'; they ask for a 'sign from heaven' (to be told sign of Jonah – 3 days and nights in the sea-monster's belly (cf Jesus in tomb); they tried to trap him (the question about the woman whose 7 husbands all died – who will she be married to at the resurrection?; and to arouse trouble with the civil law "Are we or are we not permitted to pay taxes to the Caesar?"

Any ecclesiastical authority builds up temporal status, buildings, interests, traditions. The temple and the continuous temple sacrifice of animals was a key part of temple religious life – indeed a large part of the livelihood of the priests. So when Jesus went into the temple and began to drive out the money-changers and those who bought and sold in the outer temple, he was really threatening their whole way not only of thinking but of life. “My house shall be called a house of prayer but you have made it a robbers’ cave”. At this, Mark says specifically “The chief priests and doctors of law then sought means of making away with him – “for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching” – they come and demand “By what authority are you doing this?” – Jesus again turns this round and uses their fear of the crowds who held John as a prophet – “I’ll tell you by what authority if you tell me – was the baptism of John from God or from men?”

Some writers suggest that the Pharisees/lawyers have got a bad press from the gospel writers, and there is one little indication that not all were antagonistic – there was the lawyer who asked about the greatest commandment and received the expected reply that the first is to love God, then love your neighbour as yourself to which the lawyer responds “yes, that is far more than burnt offerings or sacrifices” (the key feature of temple worship) and is told “you are not far from the Kingdom of God”.

So a toxic mixture; unable to answer Jesus’ responses; afraid for their own positions and way of doing things; afraid of the views of the mass of people “We can’t do away with him during the festival or there will be rioting”; so when Judas, for whatever reason goes to them “they were greatly pleased and promised him money” – one of his own disciples to do the dirty work. And this brings us to Jesus trial and execution which we will consider another Sunday, apart from remembering that even when Jesus was on the cross the chief priests had the temerity to question Pilate’s notice fastened to the cross “King of the Jews”; perhaps by then they felt more secure. But in a very real sense there was never a resolution to the conflict – which continues to his day.

So what should we learn during Lent from Jesus conflict with the established religion of his day? We still have an established church, with a high priest and priesthood, many buildings and long-established traditions. Should we throw out the whole edifice? We don’t have animal sacrifice, but the whole maintenance of this man-made edifice is something that we should rightly question. Jesus did not, however, say ‘don’t obey God-given laws; don’t listen to the priests; don’t use the temple – quite the opposite – what he said was use them properly. It’s not just ensuring that your outward actions fit with the letter of the law but that your intentions, your thoughts are in tune with the two great commandments. It’s not don’t listen to what is said by the priesthood including the Archbishop of Canterbury because he is part of the established hierarchy, but judge what he says and tells us to do by the rest of his actions. It’s not don’t use the established church and its buildings, but use them for the prayer and worship for which they are intended, not as stones and stained glass that are important in themselves. And, the most difficult – at least for me – if we are truly to follow Jesus we shouldn’t just spend all our time with like-minded Christians, but seek out and try to bring the good news of the gospel to those who do not yet know the love of Christ.