

Lent Compline Talks 2017 Faith in and at Work

St Mary's Kidlington
Lent 3, Sunday 19th March
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Lawyers and the Law Ps 4 & 91; Ch3; Pr 2,3,7

In our Lent Sunday morning services the next occupation in “My Faith and my Work” series will be lawyers, so tonight we will look at lawyers and the law in the bible.

The law, or at least a commandment, first appears immediately after creation. “And the Lord God commanded the man saying “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat, but NOT of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” The next reference is Moses bringing the 10 commandments down from Mount Horeb, but this was only after the subsequent slavery of the Israelites in Egypt.

It is pertinent, therefore, to look at what we know of ancient Egyptian law. Very little was written down till late when 8 books of the law were produced. However, the evidence suggests that Egyptian law was based on common-sense ideas of right and wrong, the concept of Ma’at, responsible for truth, order and balance in the universe. Everyone except slaves was equal under the law; there were no professional judges, but councils of elders dealt with small claims and minor disputes. Much use was made of oracles, with yes/no questions put to a ‘god’ carried by priests, and some movement of the god indicating the oracular answer. Priests were very involved and, it seems to me, able to determine the answer.

It was the slavery in Egypt which provoked the Exodus and wandering of the Israelites in the Sinai wilderness. Moses went up mount Horeb where God gave him many instructions and the 10 commandments on tablets of stone. He was clearly gone a long time because the people came to Aaron and asked him to fashion a god for them, the golden calf (as in all polytheistic cultures then extant). When Moses finally reappeared, in his fury at the sight of people worshipping the golden calf, he broke the tablets. He therefore had to prepare two more tablets of stone for the Lord to write the words which were on the first tablets, and to make a covenant with many instructions which Moses was to write down over 40 days. The stone tablets were then placed in the Ark of the Covenant and in the Tabernacle with its veil – the origin of the veil of the temple which was rent at the time of Jesus’ crucifixion.

In the three books which follow Genesis and Exodus (Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) and with it form the Pentateuch, which Jews refer to as “The Law” or the “Torah” nearly every chapter starts with “And the Lord spoke to Moses saying ...” followed by more and more detailed laws on offerings of meat, dealing with food, cleanliness leprosy, the ‘issues of men and women’, the high priests entry into the holy of holy etc. Numbers deals with the families and origin of the tribes of Israel, with the origin of the Levites (tribe of Levi) who were formed the priestly caste and their assistants. I’m sure we can interpret all this as humans continuing to codify the basic principles on their own terms. Judaism was becoming law-bound and peoples’ actions prescribed to the finest detail. As Moses was dying, he “wrote down this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi who carried the ark of the covenant” The book of the law was put beside the ark of the covenant.

Who should administer the law? Toward the end of Deuteronomy, the Lord tells Moses “You shall appoint for yourself judges and officers, tribe by tribe, and they shall dispense true justice to the people; they must not show favours or take bribes”. These judges and officers seem to be in addition to the councils of the elders by who laws were applied, tribe by tribe. They obviously didn’t always live up to their calling, because Isaiah complains “none call for justice or pleads for the truth; they bring forth iniquity.”

Moving forward to the time of Jesus, Israel was under Roman occupation. The elders, judges and officers (Sanhedrin) in each locality continued to administer justice with public hearings at the city gate. They could punish including the death penalty for 12 specific categories of crime, which included idolatry and blasphemy. There was also the special tribunal of priests in Jerusalem led by the high priest.

Toward the end of his ministry, in Jerusalem, Jesus clearly didn’t have much time for some lawyers, many of whom were Pharisees. In Luke we read of the lawyer who stood up and tempted him, asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus refers to the law, which the man clearly knows, but then continues “but who is my neighbour”, provoking the story of the good Samaritan. Elsewhere Jesus says of the Pharisees that “they pay tithes but have no care for justice and love of God; they just love the seats of honour in the synagogue” at which one of the lawyers said “you are insulting us too!”

At the Passion, Jesus had to be tried by Pilate because he was charged by the priests with disloyalty to the emperor and state, for which the normal penalty was crucifixion. The Gospel writers, in an attempt either to lay all the blame on the Jews, or to curry favour with Rome, portray Pilate as sensible if irresolute; a man prepared to let Jesus go or make him a candidate for the Passover amnesty because he finds no fault in him. This image contrasts sharply with the Pilate of history, who was harsh and ruthless and in the end was sacked as governor and sent to Rome to account to the emperor for his many misdeeds.

What was Jesus’ view of the law? In the sermon on the mount, he appears to be uncompromising: “Do not suppose I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets. I did not come to abolish but to complete. As long as heaven and earth endure, not a letter or stroke will disappear from the law, and anyone who sets aside the least demand of the law and teaches others to do the same is condemned. You must be better men than the doctors of the law”. He goes on to say that it is not just the act such as theft, but the thought to do the act that is culpable in the eyes of God. However, Jesus clearly had little time for what we might see as human additions to the essentials of the law: he was often chided, for example, for picking corn or healing on the Sabbath, or eating with sinners.

To conclude, while lawyers may be fallible humans, all the truly important laws are based on what is God’s law expressed clearly in the ten commandments, and completed by our Lord when he commanded us to ‘Love one another’