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## **Sermons for the Christian Year**

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# SERMONS FOR THE CHRISTIAN YEAR

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6th October 2002

## FULFILLING GOD'S LAW

*By the Revd Andrew Loat, BD, MTh*  
*Llandrindod Wells, Powys, Wales*

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Philippians 3:4b-14;  
Matthew 21:33-46

There's a wonderful saying which generations of children have heard ringing in their ears (or should I say behind their ears?): *cleanliness is next to godliness*. Its origins are obscure, but I can imagine the great public health reformers of the Victorian era having that adage inscribed – or better still, embroidered – above their beds so that every night and every morning they would remember that this motivated their life's work. And if the Western Church in recent centuries had ever taken on board the wearing of phylacteries, then surely on a little scroll inside, alongside the other commandments, would have been found *cleanliness is next to godliness*. It was, they thought, self-evident: health was linked to holiness, divine grace to self-improvement. And yet that well-worn phrase is merely an invention of human creativity and is nowhere found in the Bible.

And indeed, for all the moral wisdom found in Moses' Ten Commandments, how often have you heard that there is yet an eleventh commandment? I know that for some people it is simply, *Thou shalt not be found out*; but on a more serious note, it's tempting to append the teaching of Jesus in order to 'flesh out' the Ten Commandments. For instance, the 'Golden Rule' advocated by our Lord to love God with all our heart and our neighbour as ourselves has been called the eleventh commandment; or again, the so-called Great Commission at the end of Matthew's Gospel ('Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations') is put up as the supreme exhortation to crown the other ten.

But don't you think it's strange that we sense the need to add to the Ten Commandments? In colloquial terms, we seem to believe they require some tinkering. You would have thought that Moses would have got it right the first time round – after all, he had an enviable reputation for having God's ear. And for centuries the Church has been reciting the Ten Commandments in various ways and at different seasons because these ten declarations are seen to 'sum up' something about God and about our response to God's grace. Maybe the fact that the scribes felt the need to interpret the Torah in order to help believers keep the law in everyday life is evidence that the law as a whole was lacking in clarity if nothing else. Hence the growth of 'the tradition of the elders' which Jesus (in a way that shocked his day and generation) found greatly offensive. And in the Christian tradition, with the plethora of alternative services available I have noted for some time that several liturgies have taken to adding injunctions from the New Testament to recite alongside those of Moses. And perhaps the way churches have attached New Testament verses (thus apparently creating twenty or thirty commandments where once there were just ten) is evidence of that desire for 'added value'. By adding to the Decalogue various theological insights, we 'own' it and acknowledge it as speaking to us, speaking for us. But maybe the truth is that we are never satisfied. In a similar way we see our 'consumer society' is always hankering after new gadgets, the latest purchases, and is thereby by nature itself a restless society. Saint Augustine of Hippo famously perceived that the whole human condition, morally and in every kind of culture, is marked by varying degrees of discontent: 'Our hearts,' he said, 'are restless.'

A different kind of restlessness stirred up the scribes and Pharisees in today's Gospel reading. They were stirred by anger mixed with humiliation. For once they had really got the message from Jesus'

teaching – and they recognized he was speaking against them. They, the revered public stewards of the holy Law, were going to be cast aside by God and new, different guardians of God's revelation would be found. One wonders what Jesus had in mind. On many occasions he spoke very favourably of the Law and clearly he treated it with great respect. Was he anticipating that he himself would occupy the scribal office, or was it the Church, or maybe a select group of scribes and Pharisees drawn from those who believed in him? Of course, it's not clear. This episode is recorded because it highlights the antipathy between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees and, no doubt, because it foreshadows the rejection of Jesus: killed like the prophets before him and yet himself being so much closer to God, 'my son'. In other places in the gospels Jesus makes it plain that the Law is good, but human interpretation of it has left much to be desired. 'They tie up heavy loads and put them on others' shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them' (Matt. 23:14). The restlessness of the Pharisees was on account of their rejecting Jesus' challenge but yet feeling jealous of the esteem in which the crowds held him. Not a good combination. Eventually the arable would be fulfilled and the Son would be cast out of the vineyard and put to death beyond the city wall.

Paul was himself at one stage a Pharisee. Like his colleagues in the Gospel, at that time he felt nothing out of inward satisfaction. Moses had given the Law, the scribes had interpreted it meticulously and the Pharisees (including Paul) kept it in every detail – 'as to righteousness under the Law, blameless'. And yet thank God for those two words! – and yet for all Paul's contentment (or Saul as he was then), when he encountered the blazing glory and commanding voice of Christ on the road to Damascus all that eluded self-assurance fell away. Not only had he successfully been shown to be wrong in persecuting the Church he was also left vulnerable, feeling exposed, in all things which previously had been his life's assumptions. If he had been wrong in opposing followers of 'the Way', then how much else had he been wrong in opposing? Left blind and groping his way was an apt physical expression for the turmoil he had been thrown into inwardly. In time he would write, 'whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ'. And in place of his former brashness there grew an insistent, urgent

restlessness 'that I may gain Christ . . . I want to know Christ . . . I press on . . . forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus'.

Now let's stand back a bit and take stock of where we have got to. We've heard read the Ten Commandments and observed that there's always the temptation to want to add to them; and that temptation we have said betrays a certain restlessness in the human heart, even in the hearts of believers. We want something more fulfilling. We heard the Gospel and Jesus' strong words to the guardians of the Law in his day, springing out of his deep regard for the Law mixed with his own radical revelation. And we've observed how Paul changed so dramatically after his conversion so that what once gave him great security and self-confidence became viewed in a far humbler light because of his knowledge of Christ. Yet in his teaching we also glimpse a restlessness – Paul longs for God's work in him (and in the Church) to be completed so that Christ's glory may be seen the most fully.

Augustine was right when he wrote, 'O Lord, you have created us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.' The scribes and Pharisees knew that Israel had been created that she might keep the Law and thereby be a light to all the nations, a beacon to the Gentiles. But like Paul, or Saul as he then was, they thought of the Law as an end in itself. The interpretative tradition they developed simply drew the faithful into a legal maze rather than closer to God. The hearts of those who longed for God remained restless still. And for Paul after his conversion it took a long time of reflection and prayer before things fell into place. While he quickly confessed that Jesus was indeed the Christ and was baptized, it is easy to forget that he spent three years out of the Church's eye and by the time he came to write his epistles he had had ample opportunity to work through the connections between the Law, Jesus' death on the cross, and God's requirement of righteousness in his people. And yet what Paul discovered was that, released from the tutelage of the Law and united with Christ, his heart was satisfied – but still wanting more. Not more for himself, but more of Christ.

And what of us? We do well to take to heart the opening words of the Ten Commandments: 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land

of Egypt . . . They remind us that the giving of the Law was, as it were, the second stage of God's work for his people. The first stage was God's action on their behalf, rescuing them from slavery. The Law, ideally, allowed the people to show their response of worship and gratitude to God who had done great things for them. Similarly, however we use the Ten Commandments in our worship and devotion they, and all Christian obedience, are but a glad response to God's gracious activity in Christ. Anything less than that, and law has become a tyrant not an enabler: the trap that the scribes and Pharisees fell into is always going to be a danger both for leaders in the Church and for individuals. Lastly, we must with Paul be centred upon our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, whose resurrection power is sufficient not only to raise us to newness of life but also to conform us to a death like his. Since we are dead with him to sin, the law is no longer required; and receiving the righteousness from God that is by faith, our spirits eagerly wait, yearning to finally attain a resurrection like his.

13th October 2002

### FINDING MEANING IN THE STORY

*By the Revd Dr T. Mervyn Willshaw, MA, BD  
Lichfield, Staffordshire*

Matthew 22:1-14

It was some wedding breakfast. For the chef it can only have been an absolute nightmare. He earned his salary several times over with the wonders he performed. By the appointed time, the oxen and calves were slaughtered and the whole feast prepared. But the guests did not arrive. In fact, so vehement was their refusal to attend that they went to the lengths of killing the messengers. In consequence, the army was mobilized and sent out on its punitive, and time-consuming, expedition. The murderers were executed and the very city in which the wedding was to take place was set on fire. Nothing daunted, the chef still managed to have the banquet ready and waited patiently again as slaves went out into the smoking streets to find fresh guests.

The sheer absurdity of it all alerts us to the fact that something odd is happening in Matthew's telling of the story. Our suspicion is confirmed when we

compare this version with the one which is found in the tenth chapter of Luke's Gospel.

Luke tells a simpler tale. It relates to the Pharisees' complaint about Jesus eating with tax gatherers and sinners and it justifies his action. The sad fact is that there are those who despite their undoubted piety and serious religious commitment, or perhaps because of them, fail to recognize the urgency and the immediacy of the gift of the kingdom that Jesus proclaims. In their pedantic concern to put their lives in order they delay their response and so miss out. No direct punishment is meted out to them but they are left to their own devices, which is penalty enough. On the other hand, those with no previous expectation of being included respond gladly to the offer of a place at the feast. Luke is saying that sinners, and probably even Gentiles, discover the generosity of God.

Whether Matthew knew Luke's story, or whether they were both dependant on an earlier version, we cannot know. What is clear is that while Matthew's account is similar to Luke's in content and message, there are significant differences. Matthew has complicated the story in a way that borders on the surreal and his allegorization is stronger. Here the king is God, the son is Jesus, and the wedding feast is the great eschatological banquet. The servants are the prophets, the messengers of God. The theme of replacement is strongly emphasized. The refusal of the original guests to attend is met with vindictiveness rather than wistful regret. There is a much firmer insistence upon judgment. We have moved from the intimate, domestic atmosphere of Luke on to a cosmic stage and the uncompromising message is that the Jews, for so long the chosen people of God, must now give way to the Gentile Christian community.

What we are witnessing here is a process of editing and development of the original material in order to apply it to the evangelists' contexts and concerns. The Gospel of Thomas illustrates the process further for it contains a third version of the parable. The point of the story here is to warn the listener against commercial transactions that preclude entrance into the kingdom.

The process, in itself, is entirely proper. The Gospel is a living reality which needs to be interpreted freshly in each new situation and generation. The Christian tradition is dynamic. That is made clear within the pages of the New Testament with all its diversity within unity. The Holy Spirit did not

cease from the task of inspiring thinkers and preachers with the writing of the last of the biblical books or the fixing of the Canon. Rather, she continues to assist us all in understanding what the Gospel means and in making it our own where we are now.

But, of course, it is a risky business. Our perception is all too fallible. Our grasp of truth is never more than partial and provisional. Lack of imagination holds us back. Vested interests, prejudices and personal anxieties cloud our understanding. I think we can sense this in the story as Matthew tells it. The vindictiveness of the king offends contemporary sensitivities. The fierce understanding of judgment contradicts the concept of the radical grace of God. The anti-Semitic tendency within the story makes it a dangerous one to use in today's world. We are on much safer ground with Luke.

Ironically the second part of the story in verses 11-14, which, originally, was probably a separate parable altogether, might be seen as a warning against this very danger. Traditionally the wedding garment, which the poor man is unfairly blamed for not wearing, has been interpreted as meaning 'good works'. Perhaps we are being alerted to the peril of smugness which being included can generate and to the ease with which those to whom grace has been shown may fail to reflect it in their own lives.

All our fresh statements of the Gospel are bound to be inadequate. They are inevitably only approximations to truth because our receptiveness to the Spirit's teaching is never total. Preachers struggle to proclaim the pure word of God but know that the task is impossible. All our theologies and all our sermons are, therefore, provisional and incomplete and stand in need of constant testing and refinement.

This is a sobering thought but not a despairing one. For the glorious fact is that, despite and amidst all our distortions and corruptions of Christian truth, the astonishingly generous grace of God, which is the ultimate standard by which our sermons and statements must be tested, shines forth. The very fact that the Gospel is entrusted to such frail messengers witnesses to it.

I once had the privilege of sharing in a service to which the local branch of the L'Arche community was invited. We took the theme of 'The Good Samaritan' and while one member of the community

read the parable, others mimed it. The acting was enthusiastic and vigorous. I genuinely feared for the welfare of the Jewish traveller as he was set upon so energetically. Eventually along came the Samaritan, appropriately equipped with bandages and water. She took her time, binding up his wounds with infinite care. She gave him water to ease his parched lips. Then she went over to the innkeeper and gave him a sip too. Finally, she made her way right across the church to the place where the mugger had now resumed his seat and gave him a drink. It was magnificent!

Whether she had any inkling of what she was doing neither I nor anyone else will ever know for sure, but I suspect not. It was simply an unconscious, but altogether marvellous, development of the old, familiar story. Dare one say that it improved on the original parable? It certainly brought home its message to our situation. It proclaimed with wonderful clarity the undistinguishing magnanimity of God and laid bare the task of any Christian communicator. It was difficult and unnecessary to preach after that.

20th October 2002

### SEEING THE BACK OF GOD

*By the Revd John D. Searle, BA, BD  
Carterton, Oxfordshire*

Exodus 33:12-23; Matthew 22:15-22

One of my childhood memories is of a day-trip to the seaside. On the journey we saw a large removal van with an unusual caption on the front, 'HERE COMES JARMAN'. As it went by, we saw painted on the rear doors, 'THERE GOES JARMAN'. The writer of our Old Testament reading, using figurative language, was saying something similar, 'Here comes God' (although you won't see him face to face), 'There goes God' (but you'll only see his back). In answer to Moses' request for an assurance that God would be with him as he led the Israelites to the promised land, the Lord revealed his presence but not his full glory (v. 19). He then put Moses (figuratively) in the cleft of a rock and covered him with his hand while his glory passed by, for 'no one can see me and live' (v. 20). Only through the Incarnation has it been possible to meet God in

Person; even then, because his glory was clothed in the humanity of his Son, very few recognized him (John 14:8–10).

W. B. J. Martin defined theology as, 'Looking at God's back, interpreting where he has been in our lives', for 'Life must be lived forward but is only understood backwards', as Søren Kierkegaard put it. Many encounters with God recorded in the Bible were *in retrospect*. In Genesis 28, for instance, we read of Jacob who, resting on his journey to Haran, fell asleep and dreamed that God appeared to him with the assurance, 'Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go' (Gen. 28:15). Awaking, Jacob realized that the God of his fathers was not limited territorially, and exclaimed, 'Surely the Lord is in *this* place – and I did not know it!' (v. 16). He set up a rock, naming the place Beth-el, the House of God, and travelled on, knowing that he did not walk alone. Centuries later, St Luke described how two of Jesus' disciples were on their way from Jerusalem to Emmaus, discussing the sad events of the past week. They were joined by a stranger who, referring to the Scriptures, explained the significance of what had taken place. It was only later, as they broke bread together, that they recognized the true identity of the stranger, who then disappeared (Luke 24:28–35).

Consciousness of God's presence depends much on our present circumstances and state of mind. This may explain the weakening of Moses' sense of God's proximity. In Exodus 33:11, we read that, 'the Lord used to speak to Moses *face to face*, as a man speaks to his friend'. But later, when he was feeling insecure as Israel's leader, he was no longer aware of God's face, but only of his retreating back (v. 23). During any experience of stress or suffering, God may seem distant or even 'dead'. Job is a case in point. In the midst of his afflictions, he complained that God, 'passes by me and I do not see him; he moves on, but I do not perceive him' (9:11). Job eventually regained faith and was able to testify, 'I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you' (42:5). An editorial hand has probably added vv. 7–17 as a link between the restoration of Job's fortunes and his renewed confidence in God.

There is no lack of modern examples of those who, in a hopeless situation, know the reality of the presence of God, especially as they reflect on the past. A German, Count Helmuth von Moltke, is one such. Committed to resist Hitler, he was arrested and

sentenced to death. In a letter to his family on the eve of his execution in January 1945, he wrote that he had 'wept a little', not from self-pity,

but from an intensity of gratitude at this proof of God's presence. It is not given to us to see him face to face, but we must needs be overwhelmed when we suddenly realize that he has gone before us through all our lives, as a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night, and that in a flash, he suddenly lets us see it.

For others, like the poet Siegfried Sassoon, the horror of trench warfare in the First World War totally obscured God. It was only years later, aged 71, that he became a Christian and acknowledged that only belief in God made any sense of life. In retrospect, he understood that even during those terrible years of war, although oblivious of his presence, God had been with him.

It is to be expected that God will be more easily visible in some situations than in others. Moses asked for reassurance of the Lord's power and presence, 'Show me your glory', and received the reply, 'I will make my *goodness* pass before you' (33:18, 19). A Psalmist said, 'Bless the Lord, O my soul and forget not all his benefits' (Psalm 103:2), suggesting that to strengthen or rekindle faith, it is wise to deliberately recall the many signs of his *goodness in the world about us*. Many, like Elizabeth Browning, have discovered God hidden in the beauty of the natural world:

God is good. He wears a fold  
Of heaven and earth across his face  
Like secrets kept, for love untold.

If God is the 'Beyond in the midst of life' (as Bonhoeffer said) and the 'Depth and Ground of all being' (as Tillich put it), he is to be found in *every aspect of life*, in the arts, in science, medicine, engineering – even in the sphere of politics, for, in the Bible, the State authorities are regarded as agents of God to fulfil his purposes (Matt. 22:15–22; cf. Rom. 13:1–7; 1 Pet. 2:13–17; Isa. 45:1–7).

Perhaps, pre-eminently, God may be observed in *people*, although it is likely to be his back that we see. As Albert Schweitzer wrote, 'He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, he came to those men who knew him not'. It is hard to recognize anyone, let alone God, from the back, but in Matthew 25:31–46 Jesus provides an 'identi-kit' for apprehending God in other people:

'Just as you did it for one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it for me' (v. 40). It ought not to be difficult to identify him in those who profess *and* practise Christianity, but what of the contemporary Good Samaritan – the 'caring (pagan) neighbour' whose concern for others exceeds that of many church-goers? There is one *supreme criterion* applicable to everyone, whether Christian, Jew, Muslim, Mormon, Agnostic or Atheist, that is, *agape-love*. The First letter of John affirms, 'No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us' (4:12). Even inanimate objects may become symbols for the back of God. Jaimi Bi, a Third World recipient of famine relief, illustrates in a poem how a form of transubstantiation takes place when human love is expressed:

Every afternoon at 12, in the blazing heat,  
God comes to me in the form of 200 grams of gruel.  
I know him in every grain, I taste him in every lick,  
I commune with him as I gulp; I can hope to live one  
day more,  
For you made God come to me as 200 grams of gruel.

Like Moses, we are *unlikely* to see the 'full glory of the face of God' in this earthly life, for how could we survive such a confrontation? Therefore, we must be grateful if we can but discern his back as he passes by. Nonetheless, we may share St Paul's confidence that, 'Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face' (1 Cor. 13:12). The more we become aware of the reflection of his presence, however dimly, in past, present and future, the greater our trust that he will always be with us on the journey ahead. As with Moses, Job and so many others, he may seem out of sight, 'But he knows the way I take' (Job 23:8–9). In the words of Jesus, 'I am with you *always*' (Matt. 28:20).

27th October 2002

### THE DEATH OF MOSES

By David G. Kibble, RD, BD, Fcot, MIMgt  
Leeds, England

#### Deuteronomy 34

Moses was the Jewish leader *par excellence*. It was he who led the Jewish people out of Egypt and it was he who was instrumental in giving God's law to

them. For the Jews God was the God of history, the God who had led them out of slavery in Egypt; he was also the God of the covenant who had given his commandments to them after they had escaped from slavery. Moses was a pivotal part of these two great moments in Jewish history.

Our Old Testament reading tells of the end of Moses' life. Moses climbed Mount Nebo where he looked west toward the Mediterranean. As he looked at the land within his gaze God told him that this was the promised land for the Jewish people which he had promised to Abraham. But, God said to Moses, although he had now seen the promised land he would not lead the Jews to cross over the River Jordan into it. And so Moses died in Moab before the Jews had crossed into the promised land.

Have you ever known a great leader retire or die? Perhaps you remember the death of Winston Churchill or the resignation of Margaret Thatcher from office. Or perhaps you have known at a more personal level a leader of some kind at work move on to another job, retire or perhaps, like Moses, die. Whilst there may be some whom we may be glad to see move on or move out, there are many whom we are sad to see go. And we may wonder how on earth anyone else will take over. I remember a school head-teacher retire: he had seen the school through an important phase of development and had led the school through its first ever inspection. The inspectors labelled it 'an exceptionally good school'. We did not envy the task of the incoming head. How do you follow that? And yet within a short period of time he had led the school to pastures new with a new and different way of going about things. Once the new head had arrived we saw what might be done. But before the old head retired the staff found it difficult to see what the new one might do.

So it was with Moses. A great leader had died. No doubt some wondered how anyone could ever lead the Jewish people in the same way that he did. In one sense, of course, they didn't want a leader to lead them in the same way that Moses had. They needed someone who would lead them out of a life of wandering into a settled life in the land of Canaan: a life that would necessitate dealing with conflict along the way. The two tasks were entirely different. And they no doubt needed two very different types of leader.