

TRINITY I - Preached at Rothbury on 25 May 2008

When I was serving in senior jobs in the Army, I had to be vetted - and no, I'm not talking about what happened when we took Samson to the vet. I had to be scrutinised to see that I was not a security risk. At this stage I was a Lieutenant colonel.

The vetting officer had already sent for my bank statements, and got references for fellow officers, friends and the boss. Now it was my turn to be interviewed. We had all the usual questions: Was I gay? Had I been sexually active outside marriage? Did I drink a lot? Did I gamble? He looked a bit disappointed when I answered 'No' to them all.

So he tried another tack. What do you do in your spare time? Well, I like walking but I have a bad back which limits that a lot. I sing in the church choir, I am a Reader, so I preach regularly, I am on the PCC and Deanery Synod. I lead a home group and a confirmation class. And I do the accounts for a little stall that raises money for the church. There are two or three services a Sunday. I paused for breath.

But what do you do in your SPARE time he insisted. "I haven't any!" Are you some sort of religious maniac then?

"No, just a Christian". "What does that mean - being a Christian?" Um - how to say it in shorthand. "It means trying to live as Jesus taught - living a life of love. I don't do it very well, I'm afraid." "Love? But you said you didn't have any sexual activity outside marriage. What do you mean by love?" Kind of hard question to answer in a basically secular interview. "I suppose I mean that it is putting God and his standards first in all that I do - especially in the way I treat other people."

"Oh - I see"

The vetting went through OK. It should have been renewed every two years because of the work I was doing. When I rang up after about 3 years when nothing seemed to have happened, the guy in the office said: "Just a tick, I'll get the file." A pause. Then he said; "Its endorsed on the front - 'Don't Bother' just renew automatically!"

Jesus made a difference wherever he went. He was a subversive, as he taught that the rules of the Pharisees, who were very good people trying flat out to service God by obeying all their rules. Jesus got to the heart of things. He was different and he taught the need for simple obedience to God. That was at the heart of God's law. Things had to change radically if people were to understand and master the next phase in their journey as the people of God.

Throughout their history, until Jesus, Israel had been guided by the teachings of Moses. It was the Law that was the core of their identity as Chosen People. The Law governed not just religious life, but daily living. The nearest thing we see to this attitude to law is the Moslem idea of Sharia Law which affects all of their daily life.

For the Jews, the Law could always be relied upon to provide the answer to any question concerning morals, behaviour, social norms and legislation. But this Law, given by God, for Moses to interpret for the people, wasn't meant to be a list of limitations and restrictions. It was meant to be for guidance, for protection and for eventual salvation through the Messiah, the Anointed One, who would come when the time was right. The Law gave the basics for a healthy and secure society in which justice could flourish, and in which the covenant between God and the Chosen People could find expression and blessing. Then Messiah would come and complete the covenant; an anointed king of David's dynasty who would establish the reign of God and save Israel from every threat, internal and external.

Over the years, when the Messiah hadn't come and Israel drifted away from God time and again, and then when a prophet berated them they came back. There

was one group of people who tried their best to stick close to God tied themselves up with more and more rules on How to Keep God's Law - it was only in the minute observance of these rules that salvation would come, they thought. It was the Pharisees who developed this system to the n'th degree.

In spite of all that Jesus said and did, he did not fit the established model of Messiah in the minds of intellectual/religious Judaism, which may be why the title "King of the Jews" brought such anger down upon him at his trial. Jesus could not be the Messiah because he changed the rules by which faithful Jews had lived for a millennium and a half. He simply broke these rules and taught that they weren't necessary - in fact he said they got in the way of the relationship that each person could have with God. It was ridiculous - worse, it was blasphemy.

But it is in this chapter of Matthew, the Gospel written for a very Jewish congregation, that we see the subversive coming out. Six times in the whole of this chapter Jesus says: "You have heard that it was said... but I say to you..." Each time he takes a Mosaic law and turns it on its head. For example: the law of retribution is never to extract from a perpetrator more than their crime has taken from a victim, one eye for one eye, one tooth for one tooth, no more, no less. But Jesus goes further by commanding that we extract NO retribution at all. On the contrary, we offer forgiveness and forfeit our dignity too!

Jesus gave a law - so simple to hear - so very hard to keep. Love God and love your neighbour. This is a new order of law, unacceptable to the authorities (who are doing their best to hold the Jews together during this period of Roman occupation), but one which will make such a difference that it will change the world. It will create a new order of justice in which all the previous laws will be met, but in a different way.

This is what Jesus meant by his fulfilling of the Law: simplifying it to the essentials - love God with all your being, and love everyone else as you love yourself. This is the law for a new Chosen People, a law which extends beyond the boundaries of Israel to encompass the entire world. A new understanding of God and his

reign of radical love. This is why Jesus changed everyone he met and why they found him so challenging and so dangerous.

And this is what he asks of us: to make a difference, if necessary challenging society's more misguided values, attitudes and behaviour. To be Christian is to be different and to teach difference by our example; and to demonstrate (not defensively) the joy this can bring, because it allies us so closely with the God who showed us how. Christians don't just live lives like this for show, or to demonstrate to the world that they are better than everyone else. The true Christian acknowledges day after day his need of forgiveness because we realise that we are not better than others, we are all short of God's standards, even as Christians. But Christians try to live so that every single, different action of ours, like Jesus', begins to change the world into one more in keeping with the kingdom of God.