

## Chapel of St Peter and St Paul, ORNC

5.00pm Evensong

Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity [1 September 2024]

readings: Deuteronomy 4. 1-2, 6-9; Mark 7. 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

In his 1980 novel *The Second Coming*, the American writer Walker Percy observes at one point that ‘you can get all A’s and still flunk life’. You can get all A’s and still flunk life. As a university chaplain I’ve of course known a huge great variety of students over the years, but one that’s always stayed with me was a young woman I met just as she was about to graduate. Like so many others, she was a person accustomed to working hard and getting good results. She had done well in her coursework and had carried on doing well in her final exams. And again, now that she was about to graduate, she’d lined up a promising job as the next step in a trajectory of opportunity and success. Yet somehow, something wasn’t quite right. Everything had gone to plan – she had done everything she was supposed to do – and she took pleasure and reassurance from following the well-trodden path. At the same time, she had also begun to suspect that something important, indeed essential, was still missing. As she prepared to leave college and go on to the next phase of her life, for the first time she found herself asking what it was all for. Or, to borrow the words of Walker Percy, was getting all A’s really supposed to be an end unto itself? With this questioning, however, had also come fear: fear of failure, fear of disappointing others, fear of getting off-track. Like so many of us, this student loved to get all A’s, to follow the rules and jump through the hoops, so that she might then enjoy the rewards of having done so. But she also couldn’t help wondering if, in the process, it might still be possible to miss the whole point; that is, in short, to flunk life.

In our Gospel reading this evening, we find Jesus calling on people to set aside grade-grubbing and point-scoring in favour of the things that matter. And not for the first time, he finds himself in conflict with the scribes and Pharisees about how best to keep the Jewish law. As usual, when confronted by a rigid enforcement of religious rules, he counters with a more flexible and more compassionate view of human relationships. Love, and not the law, must always come first. Importantly, though, Jesus doesn’t actually regard the law in itself as the problem. As he tells his followers elsewhere: ‘Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them’ (Matt 5.17). So, Jesus doesn’t blame the scribes and Pharisees for observing the law but rather for not observing it well enough. They’ve become so preoccupied with the external aspects of the law that they’ve forgotten the logic and the spirit that lent meaning to these practices in the first place. They’re so enamoured of getting all A’s – of ticking all the boxes – that they seem to have lost sight of God’s call to righteousness. Jesus, by contrast, has absorbed the law into his very being, so that preoccupation with matters such as ritual purity really fade into insignificance. ‘[T]here is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him’, he assures the disciples, ‘but the things which come out of a man are what defile him’ (Mk 7.15). Holiness is not something that is achieved in the first instance by following a list of rules, but instead proceeds from an inner focus upon the will and nature of God in our lives. For Jesus, to observe the law, then, is to affirm that it is divine relationship that is the source of all love and reconciliation. And because he himself embodies the reality of this relationship, he isn’t afraid to challenge those who use the law to justify themselves, rather than grow in love for other people.

Such an understanding of the law’s purpose is radical in the true sense of the word – a return to the roots of the Jewish tradition itself. In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses calls upon the people of Israel to follow God’s statutes and ordinances for one simple reason: ‘that you may live’ (4.1). They’re not called to obey the law for its own sake, or in order to prove their own worthiness, but only so that they may come into the fullness of that life that God has given them. And here again, the reason the law engenders life is because it serves as a reminder that God is always intimately concerned with his people. ‘[W]hat great nation is there’, asks Moses, ‘that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us?’ (4.7). However much the law may function as

the basis for moral life in the community, first and foremost it is a promise of relationship with the law-giver himself. That the law is not then primarily about human attainment but rather divine availability – this essential point is affirmed by Moses when elsewhere he tells the people: ‘Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe’ (30. 11,14). The giving of the law as a statement of what is righteous and faithful and loving is therefore not conferred as a reminder of our shortcomings, but instead as a reminder of God’s readiness to be present and active in our lives. So, if we find ourselves feeling oppressed by the law, it is only because we have yet again failed to remember what it’s actually for. We fall into the trap of trying to get all A’s, even as God stands at our shoulder, offering us the very gift of life itself.

Of course, to accept this gift of life from God is to know we’re called to live for more than just ourselves. As Christians, we’re called to adhere to the disciplines of the Church, not to push others away but to draw them ever closer, to share with them the joy of knowing that God is with us and binds us together. Yet in society at large, we too often see the concept of law being employed in a markedly different way: not as a source of healing but instead as an instrument of division. In a time of increasingly reactionary politics the law becomes a tyrant, a tyrant employed to hold down the poor and isolate the unwanted. It encourages fearfulness and rewards greed. Yet God the law-giver is absent from such a law, because it is not a law that builds up human solidarity but instead breaks it down.

In the law of Jesus Christ, then, there is no such thing as getting all A’s by yourself. Instead, we begin to see life in a whole new way: not as a contest to be won or as an endless succession of challenges meant to test our right to be here, but rather as a setting in which we discover that freedom and that peace which God intends for all his children. We accept the law as a guide that gives shape to our faith that God wants us to have life and wants us to have it abundantly. And as we grow into that faith and begin to inhabit it, we discover the law is in fact a mere echo of a love that is already written on our hearts. It becomes a candle – a candle shining brilliantly in the sunshine.