

What do we do with the Old Testament Law - Anglican Schism 2 Churchill & Kingham 24/8/2008

Readings: Leviticus 18:1-5 & 24-30; Matthew 5:17-20

Introduction

This is the second of three sermons looking at what's causing the Anglican church to split.

In part one, I explained what is happening and why and I argued that it is the changing view of Scripture amongst some Anglicans in the West, that's the root cause.

If you weren't here last week, I think it's required reading.

I've never said that before.

And not because it's a great sermon!

But because you really do need to understand what is happening and why.

Please read it on our parishes' website or take a printed copy from the back.

In two weeks time, I'll be looking specifically at the issue of homosexuality.

But first, I want to convince you why it is such a dangerous error that some are teaching.

This is a newspaper quote from the 'News Quiz' replying to a letter saying the Bible says homosexuality is wrong.

Good point, well made Mr Duncan. As you say it clearly states in Leviticus chapter 18 verse 22 that homosexuality is an abomination. Which reminds me, there's a few things I need some guidance on. Firstly, if I wanted to sell my daughter into slavery, as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7, how much could I expect to make from such a deal? Also, my colleague Pete sometimes insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus clearly says he should be put to death. But am I obligated to kill him myself, or can I get some outside help? Lastly, when I burn my mother for wearing garments made from two different threads, do I torch the whole of her, or just a bit?"

There are errors and misquotes, but could you give a good answer to that man?

He does seem to have a point: why do we apparently pick and choose which bits of the Bible we obey?

Before taking up my appointment as curate in Church Stretton, I had to meet the Bishop of Hereford.

A nice man who was mad on motorbikes, and that was the main thing we talked about.

He then changed tack, and asked me my views on homosexuality - I couldn't see an obvious link!

But I gave him my understanding of the Bible's teaching, unaware of the minefield I was entering!

He asked me why I chose to apply one of the laws from Leviticus when, presumably, I would not apply the rules about eating pork, for example.

In reply, I asked him why he wished to ignore one of the moral laws when, presumably, he would not sanction the others in Leviticus chapter 18 concerning adultery, sex with animals or burning children alive!

The bishop quickly changed the subject, and the interview was soon over!

But the other night on the TV news, the Dean of Southwark made much the same point.

So it does seem to be a commonly held view amongst even some very senior clergy.

But they do have a point: why do we apparently pick and choose which bits of the Bible we obey?

'You can't apply the Bible's teaching on Gay sex', some say, 'because you don't apply all of the other parts of the Old Testament Law.'

I want each of you to be able to answer that accusation by the time you leave today.

Why it's an issue - The seriousness of sin

But before that, I'll need to convince you why this new teaching is so wrong and so dangerous.

Firstly, if we lump together all the Old Testament laws, we're in danger of downgrading the seriousness of sin.

If I lump together eating pork with adultery, stealing and lying, then I'm likely to downgrade sin's seriousness.

Now of course, in the cold light of day I won't.

But when I'm being tempted to have a one-night-stand...

When I'm filling in my Tax Return and no-one will know...

When it'll get me out of a tricky situation to tell a fib....

At that moment, I need to be absolutely clear what God considers to be serious sin – and why!

Because at that moment, the little voice of temptation will say to me that if some of the Bible's commands are ignored by the church, perhaps it's OK to ignore others.

If I'm looking for a reason to excuse what I badly want to do, any confusion about which Old Testament laws still apply might be a real open door for me.

And down the slippery slope I go!

Do you see how this new teaching that something that has always been seen as sin by the church is now a good thing, opens the door to immorality.

Exactly as Jude says in his epistle: "For certain men ... change the grace of our God into a licence for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord." V4

Jude says for some God's grace, in forgiving us as we trust Christ, even though we are sinners, has become an excuse for immorality.

But notice Jude's second reason why this is important.

These false teachers "deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord." They say Jesus is not the only boss!

In Luke 6 Jesus said to those following him: "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' yet don't do what I say?" v46

A person's Lord was the one who commanded them.

Jesus said anyone who claims to be his follower, but doesn't obey God's word, is a hypocrite. (Mat 15:7-9)

But Christians aren't just servants of their Lord - the relationship is meant to be based on love.

At the Last Supper, Jesus said "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him." John 14:21

This wonderful relationship between a person and Jesus is a relationship of love, but it starts with obedience.

How did Jesus show that he loved God? By obeying him.

How do I show that I love God? By obeying him.

Your and my obedience should be a love response; only then, promises Jesus, will God reveal himself to us.

And never forget that it was your and my sins that sent Jesus to that awful cross!

So do you see how important it is to know which commands do and don't apply to us as Christians?

If we don't, we might not take our own sins seriously enough.

The different types of Old Testament Law - which ones apply & why

So I've shown you how some Anglicans in the West are teaching that we can ignore certain of the Bible's laws.

Of course, we can't argue against that if we don't know why some of the Bible's laws no longer apply.

And if we don't know why, then their teaching could be very serious and dangerous for us.

So let's now address the core issue for today - which Old Testament laws are no longer valid, and why?

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them." Matthew 5:17f

And he then picks up the Old Testament laws relating to murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, retribution, enemies.

He not only affirms them, he shows how very demanding it is to keep the spirit, as well as the letter, of the Law.

And yet... in Mark 7 Jesus said food "doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods 'clean'.) v19

Does Jesus need to make his mind up?

Either he fulfils all the law and the prophets or he doesn't.

How can we reconcile those two sayings?

And the answer is, by asking how Jesus 'fulfilled' the Law and the Prophets.

There's no problem with fulfilling the Prophets is there?

Jesus literally fulfilled between 200 and 300 Old Testament prophecies.

So once he was born of a virgin in Bethlehem and died on a cross for our sins, those prophecies were fulfilled.

They're no longer relevant to anybody's life in the future.

No, our concern today lies with the Law, not the prophets.

And in particular his claim that "I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them."

What did he mean, to 'fulfil the law'?

There are broadly four categories of Law in the Old Testament that we need to consider.

Have a look on your handout and you will see how I have broken down Leviticus into these four categories.

Sacrificial laws in red; Moral laws in green; Priesthood laws in gold; and Laws to show that Israel was God's special and different nation in blue.

You could do the same exercise with the commands in Exodus, Leviticus or Deuteronomy.

Sacrificial laws:

One part of the Law relates to what went on in the Temple.

Sacrifices that the people of Israel had to make for their sins, the sections in red.

But it was only ever a forerunner of what was really needed, what was to come.

Even the Old Testament said animal sacrifices could never take away sin.

(Isaiah 1:11; Micah 6:6)

Only the Son of God could do that, by dying in our place.

As Hebrews 7:27 says "Unlike the other high priests, [Jesus] doesn't need to offer sacrifices day after day... He sacrificed for... sins once — for all when he offered himself."

That's why in Revelation, Jesus is introduced as "the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world." 13:8

The cross was always God's plan!

That's why, after Jesus' death, the temple and sacrificial system no longer applies.

It's been superseded - Jesus has fulfilled it in that sense.

It is job done for those laws!

Priesthood laws:

Similarly, there are laws to do with the temple priests, printed in gold.

The priests dealt with the temple sacrifices, so as we have just seen, that job has gone.

But they also approached God on behalf of the people.

When Jesus died on the cross, the curtain in the temple that separated the people from God was torn in two.

That's why the Bible calls Jesus our 'great high priest'.

Because he has offered the perfect sacrifice once for all, and opened the way for us to approach God.

The New Testament knows of no such thing as a Christian priest, because priests no longer have anything to do.

Jesus has fulfilled that role and therefore it is job done for those laws as well!

Laws to show Israel was God's special nation:

Then there are the blue laws given to Israel to set them apart as God's chosen people.

Ways of behaving that were significantly different to the pagan peoples around them.

That spoke clearly and dramatically of what God was like - holy, different, clean and pure.

These laws were given just to the descendants of Isaac and Jacob, and to no-one else.

More to the point, they were to show that at that time God was in covenant relationship with only one nation.

That all changed with the Gospel, as Paul says in Ephesians.

Talking of the Jews and the Gentiles being brought together as one people of God by Jesus' death, he writes:

"For [Jesus] himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations." Ephesians 2:14-16

By "the law with its commandments and regulations", Paul means the temple and national laws; the red, gold and blue, all of which Jesus fulfilled by dying on the cross.

So the law separating Israel as God's chosen people has been superseded - Jesus has fulfilled it by opening the door to the rest of us.

So it's job done for those laws!

Moral laws:

Which just leaves what are called the moral laws.

Do not murder, steal, slander, have sex outside marriage.

Do love God and do love your neighbour as yourself.

These laws haven't been superseded – how could they be?

Jesus has fulfilled them as he said in the sermon on the mount, but in a different way – by always, perfectly, keeping them.

Scripture constantly says that God doesn't change.

That's why he's so reliable in keeping his promises.

So if he used to think that murder was bad, you can be sure he thinks it is equally bad today and always will do.

He won't change his mind, whatever society thinks.

Which is why in the moral sphere, we mustn't change our minds either!

In fact, the moral laws are picked up and affirmed in the New Testament by Jesus and the Apostles.

And, like in the Sermon on the Mount, they aren't just affirmed, but Jesus shows just how difficult it really is to fulfil both the letter and the spirit of the law.

Of course, if we knew the 39 Articles, we wouldn't have needed to go through all of this.

And the Anglican Communion wouldn't need to have gone through all it is facing.

It's all in Article 7 on the bottom of your sheet.

Conclusion

So do you see how important it is for us to be clear on what Laws have been superseded and what still apply?

If you want to ignore certain moral laws in the Bible, you have to do one of two things.

You have to show either that the Bible does not have anything to say on the matter.

Or you must show that what it does say no longer applies.

That attempts is what's causing the Anglican schism.

We'll look at the first of those arguments in 2 weeks time.

The second you should all now be able to answer if asked.

Red, gold & blue have been fulfilled and so no longer apply – job done!

Green have been fulfilled by Jesus keeping them, but will always apply because God doesn't change.

Do you want to please your Lord?

Do you want Him to reveal Himself to you?

Then love & serve Him with all your heart, and show Him your love & devotion by knowing & keeping His moral laws.

Prayer (do business)