

Bennochy church: 2nd September 2018

The reward was conditional on just one thing. If they wanted what was promised to them by God, all they had to do was obey. It had always been so. From the words of Moses to the people who wandered the desert; there is a promised land, it is waiting for you. All you have to do, is obey God and keep his laws. In the history of the nation of Israel, law and land were inextricably linked together.

The history of the Old Testament is based on the idea of obedience, and in particular, their invasion of the Promised Land. We need to be clear about one thing, as it is described in the bible, the conquest of Palestine was an invasion. This was no empty piece of land just waiting to be occupied. Nations already lived there, who had to be either removed or subjugated. Success would come only with obedience to God, and disaster awaited those who disobeyed.

In any given war, which side is God on? During the US civil war, Abraham Lincoln met with a group of ministers for a prayer breakfast. Lincoln was not a church-goer but was a man of deep, if at times unorthodox, faith. At one point one of the ministers said, "Mr President, let us pray that God is on our side". Lincoln's response showed far greater insight, "No, gentlemen, let us pray that we are on God's side."

In war does God take sides? It is tempting to ask God to take your side. If you read the Old Testament, and the recorded history of the battles for the Promised Land and the defence of the nation of Israel, there can only be one answer to that question, and that is, yes. They clearly believed God was on their side, because they, and they alone, were Gods people. All they had to do was obey God's laws. Law and land, inextricably linked together.

The writer of Deuteronomy goes even further. He says, the success of invasion, will show to the other nations your wisdom, in obeying God and, says to God's people, and to all nations, there is no greater God, than the God of Israel. See what he has done. The writer in looking back, and puts their success down to just one thing, obedience to God. This not history. It is theology. It is the relationship between God and his people, bound together in a covenant agreement, that said, obey the law and you will be blessed.

It was crucial that this notion of obedience be passed to future generations. They had to know the story of law and land, and how it all began at Mount Sinai. Without the law, there could be no obedience and if they could not obey God, the promise of that land 'flowing with milk and honey' could not be fulfilled. There is a clear message here, their position was dependent on future generations obeying God.

Lots had changed by the time of Jesus. The people still lived in the land, but in the intervening centuries, they had been invaded themselves, numerous times, exiled and they now lived under Roman occupation. But, the law was still important in Jewish society, and in the passage read from Mark's gospel, there is the example given of the disciples of Jesus eating with ritually unclean hands. The details of that are not important, but for some, obedience to the ancient laws of Israel was still expected. As a Jew that is what you did and Jesus was a Jewish Rabbi.

By the time of Jesus, the link between law and land has been broken. It seems that the blessing of God has been removed from his people. Yet, some lived as if nothing has changed. You still have to obey the ancient laws. The detail of the legal debate, as witnessed in this discourse between Jesus and some Pharisees and teachers of the law, for us is a bit of a distraction, for us what is important is how Jesus moves the conversation on, from notions of ancient ritual, to how people actually lived their lives. Never mind the law about what you eat. Jesus says, what is far more important is what you do, and what you say. Or turn it the other way around, what good is it, if you obey all the laws, but your life does not live up to the way that God would expect.

Jesus is not saying, don't obey the law, but in him, the law is being redefined and fulfilled. He took them back to first

principles. He says, what is God's greatest command, *'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.'*³⁸ *This is the greatest and the most important commandment.*³⁹ *The second most important commandment is like it: 'Love your neighbour as you love yourself.'*⁴⁰ *The whole Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets depend on these two commandments."* They are a bit like a mirror. How does our life match up to what we see reflected back in these words? It is not what goes in. It is what comes out. The hurtful comment. The careless action. We didn't think. It does not matter, if we have obeyed all the rules and followed all the rituals. That is not the point.

If we fail to see the failures of our own reflections, then we still have the example of Jesus to follow. And that still comes back to obedience. As we seek to follow Christ; in acts of compassion, touches of peace, offers of hope and expressions of joy.

I would like to think that God's love is unconditional. That blessing will be ours in spite of the mistakes we make. Maybe more than anything else, that is what Jesus was saying. Obedience will not promise us a land, nor will law or ritual offer us the Kingdom. Ours is the pilgrim way. With a cross on our backs. Stepping out, in response to the call of Christ, who said, 'come, follow me.' Amen.