

Grace before law – a lesson in fuzzy law

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October – A lesson in teaching

I would like to give you an overview of the themes in the October readings. Then I'd like to zero in on today's reading and explore how it might be expressed in our times.

The October readings **are all about the law**. They start with the 10 commandments and end with taxes in Matthew. Jesus (and Paul) reaffirm again and again that the law must not be forgotten. Jesus was upholding Jewish law and reassuring the orthodoxy and government – there's nothing to see here. Right?

But ...(there's always a 'but') In telling the stories the way he does, Jesus is confronting, challenging and confounding Jewish leaders. While his stories are for an audience of non-believers, he knows the authorities are listening ...So he designs the stories to, on the surface, - assure authorities *and* challenge their thinking. The stories are both comforting *and* disturbing. – He walks a tightrope between truth and heresy.

This whole section is a lesson on teaching for his disciples – he models the gentle art of persuasion. Discomfort but not confrontation. Thought provoking – not reactionary.

Underlying all these stories is an intimate, brave and honest relationship Moses shared with God. Like Jacob – they argue/wrestle and at times disagree but Moses is always a faithful servant. Implying Jesus relationship to 'the Father'.

And then there's politics - Jesus, is a Rabbi, not a priest. He invites people into an intimate relationship with God. Since the Babylonian diaspora, far flung Jewish communities reformed without a temple or a priest. Lay leaders rose up. God was released from Jerusalem. Communities took responsibility for their own education and spirituality. Over generations, diversity, invention, creativity crept into practice. Just as we are re-forming after COVID.

On the return to Israel, the old order tried very hard to regain power and eradicate diverse practices...but the rabbit wouldn't go back into the hat – the teachers (Rabbis), lay leaders proved that priests were not the only people who could speak to God.

Whose Law?

So let's talk about the law, civil authority and church governance....

In other words – who's law?

It is within human nature to want certainty, particularly in uncertain times.

In contemporary society, Governments oscillate between what we refer to as fuzzy law and black letter law.

Black letter law is specific. It nails things down. It provides a sense of certainty. It is useful for areas such as tax where there are so many exceptions – you need to know the specifics. It tries to spoon feed decision-makers by imagining every situation. ¹

Those who support fuzzy law are looking for outcomes and are trusting humans and the law to draw the boundaries. Fuzzy law takes a longer view focusing on the goal and understanding that society, context, technology will change. We don't know what we don't know but if we know the outcome we are seeking – we can head in that direction.

An example of fuzzy law which is what I call law of intent – the outcome we are looking for is so clear that we do not have to list the details. Take Noah for example: God I intended to save as many animals as possible

Gen 6:19-21

¹⁹You are to bring into the ark two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you. ²⁰Two of every kind of bird, of every kind of animal and of every kind of creature that moves along the ground will come to you to be kept alive. ²¹You are to take every kind of food that is to be eaten and store it away as food for you and for them.”

¹ When I worked under a progressive government there were 5 categories for visas, under a conservative government, the number has blown out to over 102 categories as they try and pigeon-hole ever conceivable reason for entering Australia. Basically all we need to know is if you are short term, long term, working, studying or immigrating.

God did not say two Giraffes, two lions, two pussy cats – he said two of everything...and it was up to Noah to figure that out and do the best he could. If that law had been written in another time – they would have been more specific!! The problem with black letter law is it is full of loopholes. It is based on what we know – at the time. Not what we don't know or haven't yet discovered.²

Fuzzy law calls on us to be discerning – and in public life, if there is an argument, the courts define and they have clear guidance.

The way we write law today is that a Bill goes to parliament and someone, who is obviously very clever, writes a 2nd reading speech. The speech introduces the Bill; defines the context in which it was drafted and describes the problem or need it is responding to. The 2nd reading speech explains the purpose and outcome. When a dispute arises, Judges go to the 2nd reading speech for guidance. What was the intent? Is the law still relevant?

All law is interpreted by humans.

Today we were given the some of the 10 Commandments. The law from God. They sound black and white – pretty clear, really...or not. Some are – some aren't. people have argued over the application for centuries.

Number 1 - "You shall have no other Gods before me?" This is clear. 1 – it acknowledges the possibility that there are other gods and 2 – God doesn't bother to name them. That way it takes care of current and future practice. No Ron Hubbard. No Scientology.

Number2 – no images of *anything in heaven above* – goodbye Michael Angelo! You see, the down side of being too specific is you can lose the clear purpose. Are we talking about idols, paintings, icons ...?

No 4 - Remember the Sabbath – pretty well leaves it to you to figure out how you will do that and constitutes 'work'. Jesus got in trouble for this one.

² Echidnas would have to *prove* the Act applied to them even though they weren't listed. The Act only applies to those listed.

It is worth spending a whole day examining the Commandments and how they have been interpreted and mis-interpreted. But back to the story...

The people hassled God and they got their response. Like an angry parent, he laid down the law. The mountain shook and the thunder thundered, the people decided Moses was a better deal than a direct line to God. They were afraid, *very afraid*. Moses comforts them like a nanny. God literally put the fear of God into them and they backed off. This is a long way from the personal relationship that Jesus invites us into. And note – Moses was no a priest. He was an ordinary man – which implies the people *could have* had that relationship. But that is another story.

And so I digress, again

In Commonwealth law – we have the ACT – which tells us where it applies, what it applies to and where it doesn't apply (its limits). Then we have the Second Reading speech which tells us the purpose, the outcome and the why it was written....and then, we have the regulations. And as always, the devil is in the detail: the regulations. Parliament doesn't vote on regs – and this is where humans insert their own interpretations. Department's write the detail. Which not surprisingly, sometimes is in direct conflict with what the original drafters intended, But ...stay with me ...**AND, AND**

So after Exodus – we have Leviticus – the regs. They are rules interpreted by humankind. You see, nothing changes! This is where I quote the Uniting Church in Australia's Basis of Union with some pride.

The Uniting Church acknowledges that the demand of the Gospel, the response of the Church to the Gospel, and the discipline which it requires are partly expressed in the formulation by the Church of its law. The aim of such law is to confess God's will for the life of the Church; but since law is received by human beings and framed by them, it is always subject to revision in order that it may better serve the Gospel. The Uniting Church will keep its law under constant review so that its life may increasingly be directed to the service of God and humanity, and its worship to a true and faithful setting forth of, and response to, the Gospel of Christ. The law of the Church will speak of the free obedience of the children of God, and will look to the final reconciliation of humanity under God's sovereign grace.

An honest and obedient statement!!

On that note – let’s go briefly to Matthew 21:33-46 and his tenants. No, I won’t go into real estate law – I promise.

This isn’t a story about possession. It comes in a long line of stories that subtly chide Jewish listeners for not accepting Jesus as the Messiah....while on a gentile mission to convert non-jews. Remember – way back in the beginning when I was talking about Jesus framing these stories for different audiences? Well, when I said non-believers, I was talking about Jewish non-believers and non-believer believers – ie those who aren’t Jewish.

On one level, it’s a story about right and wrong. On another level, it’s about the law – what’s legal and what’s right and on the 3rd level (blow me down) it parallels the Jesus story. First the prophets come and they are killed and the son comes and they reason if they kill the son, they will inherent...(pause)

Jesus stops the story there and asks the authorities/audience what would they do – and they can only think of their rights under the law The only answer is meeting violence with violence so that law and order are established. (hmm, sound familiar?)

As the listeners miss the point, Jesus then quotes Psalm 118 – about the rejected becoming the cornerstone. No only is about a different perspective of transformation and inclusion, it is also retelling the Easter story. What rises up from what you tear down. Those who work together give fruit – those who don’t will be crushed. There will always be a point where we have to decide if we do things ‘right’ and according to the law or where we do the right thing, according to God.

They show that what the Law requires is written in their hearts, a fact to which their own consciences testify, and their thoughts will either accuse or excuse them. Romans 2:15

The lectionary writers say that this text brings us face to face with God’s exclusive demands with a challenge for righteousness that exceeds Jewish authorities. While the parable is designed to convey a history of God’s dealing with the Jewish people, it is told in such a way that the hearers are pushed to examine themselves: are they fruit bearers? The parable tells us the authorities knew that they had given the ‘wrong answer’ but they weren’t sure how.

Jesus demonstrates the difference between God's law and human law. God's grace goes before the law. The door to transformation, reconciliation or redemption remains open. Always.

The listeners could feel the breeze.

God of thunder and God of love, God of creation and Jesus heart – As long as I live on this earth, I will be challenged – not between right and wrong (that's easy) but between right and right. Guide my heart in God's law and my head in human rules and give me the wisdom to know HE trumps. Amen