

## Third Sunday service, 21 Mar 2021

### Talk: God's law, written on our hearts

It's been a rough couple of weeks, so it's good to come back together in worship and reflection.

But Jeremiah, the prophet responsible for our Old Testament reading, is ... an interesting person. He's got a justified reputation for being miserable and for writing about it at length! But it's precisely there, in the middle of his misery and depression, that we find moments of inspiration and even joy, as in today's reading.

God will make a new covenant with God's people, a different kind of covenant. God's laws will be written not on one set of stone tablets but in every human heart.

God's law is not like human laws. Which is a shame, because that's how we come to learn what laws are. But human laws change. They're debated and challenged and replaced and overturned. And this happens because they're made at particular times by human beings, for human purposes, and not always good purposes.

God's law, though, is eternal, as God is eternal. God's law expresses who God is, what God wants, for God's Creation. Like God, this law doesn't change, can't be challenged and can never be overturned.

God's law is perfect love. Paul says in Romans that love is the fulfilment of the law. Jesus Himself summed up the whole of the law in two commands: to love God and to love our neighbour.

And love, as I've said before, isn't about feelings but about actions. If we love someone, it changes how we act towards them. It makes us more generous, kinder, more patient, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13.

This new Covenant that Jeremiah sees coming, and that Jesus announces, doesn't change the law of God. Instead, it radically changes how that law is known. Instead of being locked away on tablets of stone that only a few could read, God's laws are set free, shared with everyone. They're known intimately, written on our very hearts. In the place where all our actions spring from.

All human beings have some insight into this law of God's, because we're made in God's image. But this image of God in us is distorted by the world of sin we live in, and by our own actions and inactions. This is why the psalmist cried, "Create in me a clean heart, O God." He longed to know God's law and to be able to act it out.

Which brings us to James's words. We're used, in the post-Reformation church, to the idea that we're saved through our faith in Jesus. But James points out that faith alone isn't enough – because true faith doesn't exist by itself. Even the devil, James says, believes in God! But the devil's belief doesn't lead to actions that might set them right again with God.

True faith, saving faith, produces actions. Without actions, James says, faith is dead. A living faith, by contrast, cannot help but be active. Faith in God means allowing God's laws of love to become so entwined in the core of our being that we must act when we see a need.

And this is where things get real and difficult, for me. Because this has been an intense couple of weeks. We've seen on the news again who humanity is, both the highs and the lows.

This matters for us, here and now, because a Christian community is part of our wider communities in Trumpington, in England, in the whole world. We are participants in society, and we are supposed to stand for that perfect law of God.

So I'm going to talk a bit now about ethics and morals, about what our individual actions mean and why they matter. I'm not going to talk politics, but about *our* faith and *our* actions, being guided by God's law of love.

I'm going to mention a name from recent news, and I make no apology for that. I've been *angry* this week at the gap between our country's laws and customs, and those of God's kingdom. I've been *angry* at our failings, our low expectations and our silence. I've been *angry* at what we've let people get away with, often in our name.

And, faced with God's words in today's readings about our actions showing what's in our hearts, I can't avoid the obvious connection.

The name is Sarah Everard. A young woman who was abducted from the streets near her home. A professional woman, a careful woman, who was nonetheless murdered, apparently by a serving policeman – by someone she should have been able to expect to protect her.

Think for a moment about why we've heard Sarah Everard's name but not those of, for example, Blessing Olesugun or Zahida Bi, or Maryan Ismail, or Bibaa Henry, or those of the 118 women in just the last year murdered by men in the UK.

Why do so few of these women get their stories told? Why are only a few women deemed worthy of attention when their lives are brutally cut short? And what's the common factor in those who are chosen to be remembered?

Sarah Everard's story is one of many, and it shows us a wider problem. Not just violence, but certainly that. Not just male violence, but certainly that. Men are, after all, responsible for more than 90% of violence against women in the UK.

People in our congregations live in awareness – and women are of course *most* of the people in our congregations – so, *women* live in awareness of the potential for violence against them every day. Violence that may come even if they do everything 'right', even if they wear the right clothes and phone the right people and stick to the right places.

This is the reality of gender-based violence. It doesn't just affect the victims, or their families. It affects every woman. It restricts their ability to live their lives, makes them constantly consider what they need to do to remain safe – in a way that men simply don't.

Gender-based violence isn't just about murder. It isn't just physical. It's also the words and the looks, the jokes and the put-downs, the hand on the shoulder and the forced kiss. The assumptions and the prejudices that we bring into our workplaces, into our homes, and into church.

And I want to be completely clear, here. This isn't a 'woman' problem. This is a 'man' problem. Men are the ones who are the problem.

Some of us stalk women and harass them at parties. Some of us make crude jokes at work or laugh when we hear them. Some of us whistle or call out at women in the street.

Almost *all* of us keep quiet.

When's the last time we decided not to laugh at a mate's 'joke' that was only funny if you think women are worthless? When's the last time we challenged a colleague because they ignored a woman's input in a meeting? When's the last time we explained to our boy child that girls are people, too? When's the last time we were a Good Samaritan for a woman?

This is why it's not a political problem but a moral problem, and absolutely a Christian problem and a church problem. This is about how we act towards each other, in this church and outside this church.

This is about God's law of love being written on our hearts and showing in our actions.

If you're uncomfortable, think about why. Do you think women deserve what they get? Or that it's just "boys being boys"? Or that the whole subject is too 'emotive' and difficult? Ask yourself whether your emotional discomfort is bigger than the every-day physical discomfort and humiliation of the women in your life, and the threat of constant gendered violence for them.

The problem is in our hearts, in what's written there. It's the same problem that spurred the psalmist to cry, "Create in me a clean heart, O God!" It's the gap between what we think we believe and what we actually do.

Jeremiah said that God's law would be written on our hearts. James said that we show our faith by our works. So, if we men are silent when our friends or colleagues harass women, whose law do we support? Do we live as Jesus would: the teacher who rescued a woman from being stoned, who healed a ritually unclean woman on the street, who shared water and time with a morally dubious Samaritan woman, who chose women to be among His closest companions and the first witnesses to His resurrection?

God's law is perfect love. Perfect love casts out fear.

So, loving God, let's love our neighbours. Let's commit to treating each other as loved and valued by God. Let's commit to holding each other to account when we fall short. Let's commit to making the Church, this church, somewhere that everyone *is* safe, and *feels* safe. Somewhere we look out for each other, speak up for each other, and intervene for each other.

Let's build a house of God's love, with God's perfect law written on all our hearts. Amen.

## *Before the last hymn*

The World Council of Churches has set today aside as the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. So, as we reflect on the ways we need a new heart to be created in us, and the ways God's law still needs to be written anew in us, let's pray together for an ending to the injustice in ourselves and in our society, in words that will be spoken by Christians all over the world today.

Gracious God, we confess that as human beings, we sometimes miss the beat of your call to holiness and righteousness.

We do not always move in time to your drumbeat of peace with you and with one another. We resist your Holy Spirit's nudges to follow the new commandment of our Saviour – to love one another.

Instead, we struggle even to tolerate each other and the uniqueness of each human being.

Our faithlessness puts us out of step with your movements of compassion expressed through Christ's love.

We confess that we have used our distorted voices to speak words that do not edify, but rather destroy.

We trust your grace to restore our lives, our communities, and our world to sweet harmony, especially in these challenging and uncertain times.

As we confess our sinfulness, lead us to repentance so that we will value all human beings as contributing to the orchestra of life's symphony.

May the Holy Spirit give us the courage to confront our own biases and open our eyes to our positions of privilege, enabling us to build a just community of sisters and brothers, marked with treasured diversity, mutual respect and appreciation.

Amen