

*Wisdom of Solomon 7:15-26 & Romans 8:1-11*

Pentecost, the coming of the life-giving Spirit, might cause us to reflect this morning on the relationship between Law and Grace. Law we know about, especially in places like this. It sets limits and determines consequences. Grace is more difficult to define, but Christians believe that in Jesus Christ we can have a new relationship with God and therefore a different way of living. The Holy Spirit . the %ord and Giver of Life+as we say in the Creed - is the one who brings this Grace, and therefore the gifts of the Spirit are love, joy and peace.

The Bible often contrasts Law and Grace but they are not necessarily opposites. Nor is it true that the Old Testament is all about Law and only the New Testament about Grace. For the first People of God the Law was not primarily a set of external regulations, curbing and punishing human behaviour. They saw Law as the gift of a loving God, setting out what God expected of them in the Covenant he had made with the People. So the Law included matters of belief, not least in opposing idolatry: %ou shall have no other gods but me+. It also set out how they should live . matters of personal behaviour . and how they should live together, most famously %ou shall love your neighbour as you love yourself+. Law provided the foundation and the framework for their lives under God. It could be restrictive and unforgiving, but it meant well.

And nor was what the New Testament calls the Holy Spirit totally missing in the Old Covenant. According to the Book of Genesis the Spirit of God, the giver of life, was present at Creation, hovering over the face of the deep, as all that is came into being. And for the prophet Ezekiel it was the Spirit who breathed life into the dead bones, just as God wanted to resurrect his People from death to new life.

And something else that points is in the direction of the Holy Spirit. We heard about it in that first Lesson. There developed alongside the Law what's called the Wisdom Tradition. Wisdom was both rational but also deeply spiritual, a life force underlying all things but also something which transcends all things. And when they began to personify this, it was not as a man but as a woman. We heard: *In her is an understanding spirit holy, loving the thing that is good. Kind, steadfast, sure, free from care, having all power, overseeing all things. For she is the breath of the power of God. She is the brightness of the everlasting light, the unspotted mirror of the power of God, and the image of his goodness.*

When we come to the New Testament Jesus both upholds the need for Law, but realises its limitations. In particular he condemns the way that the religious leaders have used it: their hypocrisy, their self-righteousness, their exclusion of others. By contrast the word *Grace* describes the new way that Jesus brought. Perhaps the parable of the Two Sons best illustrates the difference. The younger *Prodigal* son deserves nothing under the Law except condemnation, but what he finds is acceptance and forgiveness. His older brother is totally justified, under the Law, to feel aggrieved and let down, but at the end of the story he is the one standing outside the party, refusing to accept the way of Grace.

And so we come to Pentecost, to the coming of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit who gives life in Creation, the Spirit who is the Wisdom of God, the Spirit whom Christ told his followers he would send in his stead, comes with wind and fire. And it's OK to keep calling the Holy Spirit *She*.

Pentecost is the birth of the Church, a Church which would quickly outgrow its Jewish origins and their ethnic identity. The Holy Spirit breaks down every boundary, and one of the central concerns of the Church was what it now meant to live, not under the Law, but in the new realm of Grace. They soon ditched, not the ethical demands of the Law, but its religious requirements, especially as the Spirit drove them out to attract more and more Gentile members.

St Paul in his Epistles keeps coming back to this relationship between Law and Grace. As we heard from Romans, the requirements of the Law remain, but the Law itself cannot set us free. Indeed it may only add to our troubles and our sense of failure. What we need, says Paul, is the life-giving Spirit. What we need is to let the Holy Spirit set us free. What we need is the gift of Grace.

Well, what, more practically, might this say to us this morning? I offer you these two thoughts. First, we need to see ourselves and other people more in the context of grace rather than law. Standards, morals, principles are important, indeed essential, but we need more than that. We need to focus on what gives life to us and to those around us. On wisdom rather than cleverness.

And when things go wrong, a central part of grace is forgiveness, God's forgiveness of us, our willingness to forgive others.

Yesterday, preaching at the Royal Wedding, Michael Curry talked about the redemptive power of love. He said it was like a fire. The Holy Spirit comes like fire.

Second, more publicly, the tension between Law and Grace might also lead us to think again about what has been classically called Virtue. Going back to Aristotle %virtue+signified that which is morally good, a foundation of principle, what makes for goodness and moral purpose. We began to lose that at the Enlightenment,

when Virtue became being replaced by economic liberalism, individualism and consumerism.

With due deference to the legal profession, law is a poor substitute for character and virtue. At best it signifies what behaviour can be expected, at worst it reduces human activity to ticking boxes rather than good acts, only avoiding what you can't get away with.

So it is that we now live in a culture which believes, with little evidence, that problems will be solved by more and more Regulation. Data Protection, Grenfell Tower, Professional Standards, Child Protection – at one level who could deny the need for higher standards, the tightening-up of rules, better supervision. But these on their own will not deal with the underlying issues, indeed they may sometimes make matters worse.

The response to the financial and economic crisis of 2008 has been more regulation, especially of the Banks. I'm not suggesting that we remove it, because it was after all deregulation that allowed the crisis to happen in the first place. But we do need to ask whether the real answer is not more law but a rediscovery of Virtue, recognizing what is right, and committing ourselves to it. Otherwise, more regulation may only cause more people to find more ways around it. As I said last week about Tax, it's a moral question, to be addressed by doing what is right not by more accountants finding better loopholes.

So let us pray to the life-giving Spirit that we may find a better balance between law and grace, in our own lives, and in putting Virtue back into the centre of our public life. My favourite Pentecost prayer, which I often use with the choir before our services here: Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your people, and kindle in us the fire of your love. Amen.