

# Zoom service talk for 13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity

By Ian Totterdell, Churchwarden

*Readings: Deuteronomy ch 4 vv 1-2 & 6-9; James ch 1 vv 17-end; Mark ch 7 vv 1-8, 14-15 & 21-23*

Today's readings all refer to the Jewish law, but have very different views about it! In the Deuteronomy passage Moses tells the Israelites that the law they have been given by God is more just than any other, and they must observe it diligently. In contrast in the Gospel Jesus criticises the Pharisees for relying too much on following the letter of that law rather than its spirit. And finally James in his letter looks toward "the perfect law, the law of liberty". So how can we reconcile these varying views?

The law given by the Lord to the Israelites through Moses in the first five books of the bible (the "Mosaic" law) is very detailed in what should and should not be done in order to live lives acceptable to God (and those detailed commands do include some about ritual hand-washing before meals and other tasks). Jesus said many times that he had come to complete the law rather than do away with it, but he was also clear that the law could be summarised in two commands: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind; and your neighbour as yourself." (Matthew 22:37-39)

Human lives are complex, and attempts to give precise instructions that work in all situations frequently fail, as we have seen in the regulations during the Covid lockdowns (why could I not visit an elderly relative but a cleaner could? Is a scotch egg really a full meal?). But I *don't* think that Jesus's emphasis on less-detailed commands came about because the detailed law had failed; rather, it was the people who had failed to keep it. It's not as if God decided that the Mosaic law was too tough for people to keep and so decided to "lower the bar" and re-define some former sins as no longer wrong. If God had been able to do that he wouldn't have needed to send Jesus to suffer and die on the cross so our sins would be forgiven; and if we regard the law as an expression of God's loving, merciful and holy character then the fact that he is "the same from age to age" means he cannot change the law either. But God *can* change us so we can obey the law (both in spirit and letter), through putting his Holy Spirit in us and adopting us as his children.

The Pharisees' error was not that they took pleasing God and being acceptable to him seriously (we all should do that), but that they went about it the wrong way. They concentrated on certain details (of washing hands and utensils, in this case) instead of the bigger picture (being motivated by generosity and love). In fact, there are lots of other detailed commands that are more in directly in line with what God says is most important - according to the prophets who time and again were called to demand that justice, mercy and a whole range of material necessities be provided to the poor and needy by the rich and powerful. Such commands included those telling landowners not to harvest right to the edge of their fields, and to let those without land pick the wheat and barley there to feed themselves; remission of debts (and freeing slaves) every seventh year; and the Year of Jubilee every 50 years when all land reverted to its original owners. But, sadly, it doesn't seem that the Pharisees were quite as keen on enforcing those commands.

Modern businesses are encouraged to have measurable outcomes in their contracts, so that it is easy to see if some company or person is fulfilling what they have signed up to: so a cleaning company might sign to show they have checked the cleanliness of an office every day, or a toilet every hour, or a university academic might have to show they have published two or three research articles in journals each year. That works in some areas of life, but doesn't work in keeping the important parts of God's law. The Pharisees seem to have concentrated on the more measurable outcomes (have you washed your hands before eating? Yes - tick!) but downgraded the importance of others (such as showing compassion to widows and orphans). It's as if someone thought that loving their spouse only meant buying them a bunch of flowers on specific occasions rather than continually sharing times of joy and tenderness with them, and supporting them in times of trouble.

Pleasing the Lord by following the "law of liberty" involves imagination, empathy and a willingness to take chances when called to do so. That can seem harder than "ticking the boxes" of a detailed regulation, but it brings us closer to the Lord and, guided by his spirit within us, lets us share his loving heart. Rather than just having clean hands, sharing God's heart is exactly what God wants for us, and what he sent Jesus to achieve.