

I'm pretty sure that if you asked any member of parliament who had been leader of the opposition and prime minister which was the easier job, then, despite its obvious frustrations, they would all say that being leader of the opposition is the easier. As leader of the Opposition you can come up with all sorts of wonderful ideas and, as long as you are not too close to a general election, you never have to actually prove that they would work, that they would be better than what the Government are putting forward on that day. Now I must say that this is not in any way a view on either our current leader of the Opposition or Prime Minister, both of whom at the moment have not actually held the "other" job.

Another thing about being leader of the opposition is that you can stick to all your principles. Almost without exception, once an opposition party becomes the party of Government, some of their principles tend to slip in favour of a pragmatic decision made in Government. And that is just in our country where, let's be honest, in a lot of areas our two main political parties are not all that far apart in what they would actually do in Government. The system doesn't allow massive changes. Just take a look at what happened when poor old Liz Truss tried to do something a little revolutionary: the forces of stability in our country rounded on her, and she was out of office in a trice, and her policies disappeared almost as soon as she did.

So, if in a country, the opposition party is truly a reactionary, or even a revolutionary opposition, would the same thing apply? Would, if they became the ruling party, their reactionary or revolutionary policies immediately get watered down? I wonder. In Government, in terms of running an economy, how different is, say, China to the USA I wonder?

All of which, in a strange way, leads me to our reading from St Matthew's gospel this morning, the main body of which is concerned with Fulfilling the law – and the law in question is that laid down in the Torah – the first 5 books of the Old Testament – the laws which were built up from the those laid down by God to Moses, and were, prior to the arrival of one Jesus of Nazareth, the basic laws to be followed by all those of the Jewish faith.

And then arrives on the scene, our revolutionary leader of the opposition – Jesus – who we, these days, like to believe was the man who simply threw out the vast majority of the Mosaic laws and introduced his own, simpler versions. Or did he? And if he was indeed advocating something of a revolution against the scribes and the pharisees who we now see as the establishment of the time, what was it that he had to do to win his argument? You see Jesus had no intention of being the leader of the opposition – his intention was to tell people how to live their lives – if you like as the equivalent of a prime minister.

To work this out we need to look at the second part of the gospel reading first – I will come back to the first part later.

This whole reading is part of the sermon on the mount. It comes after the beatitudes that start that sermon – the blessed as they are sometimes known: blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted, blessed are the meek – I'm sure they will be at least a bit familiar to you.

And it comes before some of the detailed teaching which the Sermon on the mount covers – anger, adultery, oaths, retaliation, love for your enemies and so on.

So what is our revolutionary leader saying – "Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." And the key to that sentence is what Jesus means by the word fulfill?

Matthew in his gospel talks a lot about righteousness, and he has a particular take on righteousness – he considers righteousness to be, doing the right thing. Jesus, and we must never forget this, was a good

Torah observant Jew. It is how he was brought up, it was the basis on which he lived the first 30 years of his life, and it remained with him until his death. But, and here is the key, his Torah observance was not a ritualistic observance – he did not just do things because it was written down on a scroll somewhere that this is what you should do – he did things because he believed those things to be right according to what God, his Father, had instructed him, and he had a clear disagreement with the pharisees and the scribes about the interpretation of many of those laws. But does that answer the meaning of the word fulfil in this context?

It seems to me that there were two tensions around following the laws at the time – there was a tension to abandon the laws, and there was a tension towards obsessive observance of the law – and Jesus said that both those tensions were wrong. The laws in the Torah have a supportive role as we seek to follow the Messiah Jesus, but it is how those laws are interpreted which is key.

It is that interpretation which follows the basis of all of Jesus' teaching – during the remainder of the sermon the mount and beyond. It is through that teaching that Jesus teaches us how to fulfil the laws.

But how does that work for us in practice today? On the one hand we have the Torah, which was based on Moses' writings of something over 1,000 years before Jesus lived on earth, then we have the teachings of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament some 2,000 years ago. And then we try and work out what that all means for us today. That's certainly a challenge.

I'm not going to talk again about the issue of our approach to human sexuality that will dominate General Synod this week – but what I do want to say something about is the importance of us being prepared to be distinctive in our world. There are many laws written in the Torah which Jesus disagreed with people's interpretation of – I guess the most well known is an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Later in the sermon on the mount Jesus says, “You have heard the law that says the punishment must match the injury: ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also. If you are sued in court and your shirt is taken from you, give your coat, too. If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles. Give to those who ask, and don't turn away from those who want to borrow.”

and he followed that up by saying, “You have heard the law that says, ‘Love your neighbour’ and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven.”

Those are two approaches to life that many people would today would have a real problem with. The desire for revenge is still all too common in our society – but we must not be afraid to stick to these teachings – to be distinctive. It is often argued by people outside the church that we are out of step with modern society. We are sometimes seen at best as irrelevant, at worst vindictive, homophobic, a waste of space. Which of course in some ways is how Jesus would have been treated and how did he react?

In John Chapter 15 we are told how he reacted and how we should react. “If the world hates you, remember that it hated me first. The world would love you as one of its own if you belonged to it, but you are no longer part of the world. I chose you to come out of the world, so it hates you. Do you remember what I told you? ‘A slave is not greater than the master.’ Since they persecuted me, naturally they will persecute you. And if they had listened to me, they would listen to you.”

So we must not be afraid to be distinctive. Jesus calls us to be different, and we must not forget that. But before the world hates us more than is necessary, let's make sure that we have our interpretation of those laws from the Torah, indeed of the entire bible, correct.

And once we know what we are going to say, and how we are going to live, Jesus tells us how, in practical terms, to live our lives, as we return to the beginning part of our gospel reading.

"You are the salt of the earth." As I'm sure you know, salt was a really important substance in biblical times – more so than it is today. Its principal use was a preservative – indeed it is not that long ago that it was still being used as such – I can certainly remember my parents bottling runner beans in salt solution before they had a home freezer. But then we get the follow up line; "but if salt has lost its taste (or in some translations it will say saltiness) how can its saltiness be restored. The thing you need to remember here is that salt, in biblical times, was not available as the pure white substance you buy in plastic bags that we see today. They would have dug their salt out of the ground, and so it would be mixed up with gravel, and goodness knows what, and so if for some reason water poured through it, your, "salt" would have lost its saltiness, as all you would be left with is the gravel. Hence, it is no longer useful for anything and is trampled underfoot. So that water that will wash away the salt can be seen to be the distractions of life maybe, the wrong teachings, the suspect interpretations of the laws which take us away from being able to proclaim Jesus as our saviour.

And then we have the light part of salt and light. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. We have something to tell people. Don't hide under a bushel basket but stand on the hill and proclaim that message. That's what we are called to do.

An interesting point here, though, is that Matthew has Jesus telling the people he is preaching to, "You are the light of the world." In other places we have Jesus saying, "I am the light of the world." Why the difference? Because one of the fundamentals of Matthew's gospel is that he sees, and portrays, Jesus' life being played out through the life of his disciples – whether that is the 12, the crowd he is preaching to from the mount, or to us today. We are the light of the world because he is the light of the world.

So what our gospel reading is saying to us today is this. Jesus did not throw out the laws of the Jewish faith as laid out in the Torah; he was a good Jewish man who followed those laws. However, he did disagree with false interpretations of those laws, and didn't mind confronting the authorities with his point of view. Clearly, interpretations of those laws had changed over a period of 1,000 years. And from there we need to work out which interpretations of these laws are still valid today, another 2,000 years later – and if those laws put us at odds with society, then we should not be ashamed to stick by those interpretations if we are still happy with them. But we must not underestimate the affect our interpretations may have on other people. We must remain salty – and if our saltiness starts to decline, we need to do something about it. Because at the end of the day, we need to be on that hill, shining our light to others – because that is what God is calling us all to do. God does not want us to be leaders of the opposition – God wants us to be prime ministers.

Amen