

Have you ever read a long legal document, considered all the clauses and sub clauses, and then asked the question – but what does it actually mean?

In one of my past jobs I worked as a civil servant in the private office of a minister of state, and on a few occasions I accompanied the minister to the House of Commons for a debate which could eventually lead to a new piece of legislation. Many such debates take place and they are frequently held with just a small number of members of parliament present.

And after several such occasions, sometimes in front of the full house of commons, sometimes in front of the house of lords, sometimes in committee stage or reporting stage, a long and detailed piece of legislation can become the law of the land. And how many of us really understand what it actually means?

I rather suspect a similar situation had been reached in Jesus' time. Many of us have ploughed through the laws which make up a significant part of the Torah and wondered at the end of that exercise whether there was really any point to such an exercise as the vast majority of them seemed to have no relevance to us, and our faith today. Yet those laws exist, in writing, in our bibles.

Psalm 119, which Karen read the first 8 verses of at the beginning of our service – the first 8 of 176 verses I should add – is all about the love of the law. The psalmist gives reason after reason why he loves following the law of God – the psalm is a dialogue with God conducted by a devout man of God, a leader whose purpose in writing the psalm was to encourage others in their spiritual life. But what it is not is a list of do's and don'ts – it is simply a list of what a benefit to your life following God's laws can be.

And when you come to our reading from St Matthew – that extract from the Sermon on the Mount – what we actually have is paragraph after paragraph of Jesus giving his interpretation of those Torah laws. And many of those interpretations are taking us away from the letter of the law and towards really understanding what is going on behind those laws. In this section we are reminded that the laws say, "you shall not murder", and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgement".

But what Jesus is saying now is that there is a whole area between doing nothing wrong, and committing murder, which we need to address. We all know that murdering a brother or sister would be wrong – but Jesus says even being angry with a brother or sister makes you liable for judgement. And, what is more, you are not allowed to leave that anger to one side and get on with life – you must sort it out before going on. You must sort it out before coming to worship God.

But hang on a minute – we are just talking about getting a bit cross, a bit of a disagreement. Is that so bad?

Is it so awful when in the House of Commons, when it is fuller than when I saw it, you have grown adults shouting at each other, waving order papers at each other, trying to make a point through the noise, as someone said something that they disagreed with. Surely that's just part of our politics. Insults flying too and fro are just part of what goes on.

Out on the streets, supporters of rival groups jeer at each other, then begin to jostle and threaten. That's the same thing isn't it? And then fists start to fly. Knives come out and by the time the police arrived another young person has been killed because two people disagreed. Is this what human life was meant to be like?

Jesus knew this world too. People of his day who wrote about the world describe incidents just like this. Romans insulting Jews, Samaritans attacking Jews, Jews fighting back, different Jewish parties insulting and attacking each other.

The fault lines often ran through villages, through families, and sometimes even through households.

And we all know how anger can be passed on don't we? The executive whose boss has shouted at him goes back to his office and shouts at his assistant. The assistant goes home and shouts at his children. The children then go and shout at the cat. And everyone is miserable. And what Jesus is saying is that this is not good enough; it is not how God father wants us to lead our lives. God calls us to live in love, and peace and harmony, and no, no-one is claiming this to be easy, but we must try – because a loving, caring, peaceful family, a loving caring peaceful church is the sort of body which is so much likely to attract people than the one which you can hear the disagreements from halfway down the road.

And then we get this amazing passage from Paul's first letter to the people of Corinth where he gives two more lessons in the same line. Paul wants the people in the church in Corinth to grow in their love of God, but he is sensitive enough to realise that some of them were finding things difficult. You can just imagine that if a new Christian is told, "You can't argue with your brother or sister" they may be at best confused – but Paul says – we'll take you on your journey slowly, we'll start with milk, and go on to solid food when you are ready. When we talk to people about Jesus, we mustn't expect people to understand everything straight away – let's face it – we don't so why should they. So we must nurture people in their faith journeys; give people time, if they only want to come to church once a year for a carol service accept that, and pray for them.

Because the second lesson Paul is giving us is that we can only go so far. I used to worry that I didn't seem to convert many people to be followers of Jesus – but what Paul is saying here is, David, that's not your job. You can bring them to a place where they might listen to God – and then leave them there, whilst God does his stuff. "So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters, is anything, but only God who gives the growth."

Relationships, relationships, relationships. That's what this is all about. Amen.