

Sermon: Luke 13.10 -17

Among the many cul-de-sacs I have taken my mind along in the way of stimulating the intellect – I have spent quite a lot of time reading about Pharisees – in many ways the classic anti-heroes of the New Testament. What is interesting, if you do that, is that you are apt to discover things about them that you might find surprising.

Firstly, they were not Priests nor people who took a place in the hierarchy of the Jerusalem Temple. Pharisees were in fact lay people – people who often held other positions in society - and had other jobs - with tent making being one well known example of an occupation of one, who declared himself to be among their number. They were pious – but not necessarily in the negative sense of that word – they were rather dedicated to their religion and its practice. Some of that practice meant taking some of the purity rituals found in the temple and seeking to apply them to their daily lives – having a ‘rule of life’ like some who follow monastic practices might have a ‘rule of life’ today. They were often at odds with their more powerful religious cousins - the Sadducees - and their beliefs differed from them – believing in resurrection and the ‘Oral Torah’ as well as the written. Amazingly in that, to a great extent, if you want to split the Sadducees and the Pharisees apart - and offer to them the labels ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’ – the Pharisees were the liberals.

They did spend a lot of time seeking to interpret the law, which they sought to keep as a joy - not as a burden. That joyful law keeping was in response to the fact that God chose – or more theologically elected - Israel as his people. Pharisees did not keep the law to get into the covenant but as a way of remaining in it – they kept the law in response to God’s graceful act of electing them. Often their interpretations were simply thoroughly pragmatic and sought to give those who followed their teachings a way of not falling foul of the more than 600 commandments that can be found in the Old Testament - and still have the opportunity to live reasonable practical lives. A strange living example of today, that might illustrate this, is that on the sabbath, in many Jerusalem Hotels, the lifts stop on every floor. That is to prevent people having to push a button to select their floor – an act which might be considered work. The life of the hotel is able to go on then - and people need not be in conflict with their religious beliefs. That may sound odd to us in our culture, but I would guess that some of the things we do and say would be no less odd to those who experience our culture as strangers.

All of that may leave you thinking that this is not what you thought Pharisees were about – all of that is just a little too positive a description for a term which we use commonly to describe someone who is pedantic and nit picking about correctness. So why is that? Why is there such a conflict between what we have heard and what is said here. Canon Simon, in his sermon last week, that I caught up

with on Youtube, said that many of the Gospels were written in a period some 30 or more years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Along the way between 66AD and 70AD, at and before the Gospel writing period, the Jews rebelled against Rome and the Temple was destroyed. To some extent this led to Judaism having to partly redefine itself and if there was a conflict between Sadducees and Pharisees in that, this was a triumph for the Pharisees, because it was they who became the spiritual leaders of the surviving and dispersed Jewish community – the forerunners of the Rabbis of today.

At the same time many believe that the earliest Christians – who up to this point had muddled along with their Jewish brothers and sisters as ‘eccentric’ Jews - found that this redefinition could no longer accommodate them. They had to stand now on their own two feet – not as just another new sect - but rather now as a new religion.

All of that means that when the Gospels were written the key opponents of the nascent Christian community had become the Pharisees.

None of that means that Jesus in his own day did not sometimes find himself in conflict with Pharisees, because, as I will later say, every religion is beset by its legalists and legalisms. This does mean though, that we ought to be cautious about taking the Christian interpretation of Pharasaism as found in the New Testament absolutely at face value – because when we speak of those we are implacably opposed to - we tend to caricature them – we draw cartoons of them.

Anyone too easily drawing cartoons with reference to the Jewish community, cannot do so without drifting to some of the most horrific outrageous of human history and thus, I think, some of the importance of this discussion. Some Jewish people would tell you that the use of the term ‘Pharisee’ as a term to describe a petty-minded legalist – owes so much to the New Testament cartoon, rather than the historical reality - that its use in this way is itself ‘anti-Semitic’. I think they have a point.

All of this arises from a story in our Gospel reading this morning that that sets up a juxtaposition between the law and compassion – which of these has priority. Our response as reader – and as Christian - is to obviously go with compassion and you would find very little in Pharisaic teaching that would disagree with that. At the same time, we know all too well that there are legalists in our world and sometimes just because the law is an ass - does not mean that some will want to strictly apply it.

And sadly, we as a church are not immune. Only this week I was asked to offer a quote about an approaching service reflecting on the business of people dealing with the aftermath of the death of a loved one through suicide. I quickly came up with something reflecting on the deep challenges of that - and offering words about God’s compassion in those dark circumstances. The person I

produced the quote for could not cope with some of that - because of the audience who would hear it - and she reminded me that even as recently as 15 years ago people were told that their loved one could not be buried in consecrated ground because they had died at their own hand. On reflection I remember also meeting real people in my ministry who told me of the time when their dead child could not be buried in the churchyard, as it had not been baptised.

All religions then can suffer from legalism – Pharisees were probably not the masters of it – indeed much of their deliberations about the law sought to soften the law and make it liveable with.

Jesus prioritises people over politics and compassion over law. We live in a world that still needs to order itself - and thus laws will always be there to keep people safe and protect the common good. Properly applying the law though, at its best, is a compassionate business. We need people to be called to do that and we need ourselves the grace to challenge those times when it is simply applied for its own sake –just because it is there. It is a challenge that Jesus himself would make to us – along with a Pharisee or two.