

The Law and the Prophets

Sunday Next before Lent

Ex. 24.12–18 God appears to Moses on Mount Sinai; Ps. 2 You are my son, *or* Ps. 99 A pillar of cloud; 2 Peter 1.16–21 We ourselves heard this voice; Matt. 17.1–9 The transfiguration

‘Jesus ... was transfigured before them ... Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.’ Matthew 17.1-3

The Hebrew Bible

When our Jewish friends are talking about what we call the Old Testament, but which to them is the whole of the Scriptures, they may just call it The Law, with a capital ‘L’, or they may be more specific and call it ‘The Law and the Prophets.’ The first five books are about Moses – not *by* him, because they describe his death – and they are the Law; then come the history books, Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, which the Jews call the former prophets, and they tell the story of Elijah, Elisha and several other early prophetic figures. Next come the Later Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve Minor Prophets; and finally the Psalms, Proverbs, and other books of poetry.

Transfiguration

So when Jesus went up the mountain with Peter, James and John, where they saw him talking to Moses and Elijah, that symbolised the whole of the Holy Scriptures: the law and the prophets. As he said himself, Jesus had not come to supersede the Jewish religion, but to fulfil the promises to which it had been pointing. The disciples had come to know him as their dear friend; now they realised that he was far more than that: Jesus was the climax of the process of revelation which began with the creation, but was incomplete until he came to show what the laws and the prophecies really meant.

Discipline

When you are bringing up children, you must start with a little simple discipline. ‘Don’t do that, Darling, you’ll hurt yourself if you go on like that.’ Of course they don’t listen, and carry on misbehaving regardless, and you try to catch them before they have wound themselves too badly. Then they cry, and you comfort them, and gradually they learn that it is advisable to pay some attention to what their parents say. It was like that when the human race was young; God revealed his laws to us, to stop us harming each other. In the early days, it was the job of the tribal chief to keep his tribesmen in order. Sometimes he or she would do this by inflicting very harsh punishments on the disobedient. So they started to write the laws down, so that there should be a uniform standard of justice across the whole country, with only limited vengeance allowed. Your neighbour knocked out your eye-tooth and put out one of your eyes, did he? That is serious, the tribe can’t ignore that. If you insist, you can do to him what he did to you; but no more than that: only one eye for one eye, no more than one tooth in revenge for one tooth – any more than that would lead to a vendetta.

Justice

Even in the modern world we cannot manage without a justice system. Those who work as lawyers are often inspired by an ideal of creating a more just society. It is important to remember that the accused must always be treated as innocent until they are proved guilty, and for that reason many suspects cannot be punished because there is not enough evidence; but that is preferable to imprisoning the innocent.

Prophets

But if you develop a rigid legalistic code, with every possible offence covered, many acts which are deeply immoral, but not illegal, will be ignored. So God also sent prophets, to dig beneath the surface of the law, and bring out the principles on which it is based. They called kings and judges to account, and warned them to treat the poor folk fairly, avoiding corruption and violence. Elijah’s contest on

Mount Carmel with the immoral prophets of Baal was as a symbol of the task of the prophet, just as Moses on Mount Sinai receiving the tablets of stone represented the role of the law. But a just society needs both. Jesus met Moses and Elijah on yet another mountain, the Mount of Transfiguration, to show that the teachings of the law and the prophets are both over-ridden by the Law of Love. Observe the basic principles of Love God and Love your Neighbour, said Jesus, even if it means healing on the Sabbath day; seek justice for the oppressed, even if it means being a lone prophetic voice crying in the wilderness. Both the law and the prophets are subsumed in the teaching of the Transfigured Christ.

Revd. Michael Counsell

2.3.14

All-age worship

Make cardboard 'tablets' with commandments for parents on one, and commandments for children on the other.

Suggested hymns

*Jesus, these eyes have never seen; Long ago, prophets knew; Lord, the light of your love is shining;
'Tis good Lord to be here.*