

St John the Baptist, Catford

Last Sunday after Trinity

Leviticus 19:1-2,15-18

Psalm 1

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

'Small dogs must be carried on the escalator.'

How many of you have seen that sign on the Tube?

And how many of you have gone up or down an escalator on the Tube without a small dog?

Dear, dear – I'm ashamed. How could you break the rules so obviously?

Small dogs must be carried on the escalator, and yet you have travelled on them *without* a small dog.

You people!

Does anyone want to make a defence of yourself?

How can you possibly justify travelling on an escalator without a small dog?

I'm alright by the way, because I always stick to this rule.

...

Well, you've hit the nail on the head – when we read those signs, we *interpret* them don't we?

We know what the rule is aimed at – it's aimed at poor little doggies getting their paws caught in the steps as they come together.

And we know that everyone doesn't have to have a small dog in order to go on the escalator because, well, firstly, that would be a bit silly wouldn't it?

But also, because there would just be no *point* in having a rule like that.

I use this illustration to try to point to an important truth: all rules need interpreting. They cannot just be applied blindly, because there are always points that we need to interpret with some common sense, some understanding of what they are *for*.

And religious rules are no different.

There are supposed to be 613 Jewish laws in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible – and the word Torah actually means 'Law'.

But how are you supposed to know which are the most important; which to try extra hardest at; which *shape* the others?

Laws have to be read together, they have to be interpreted.

And that is what rabbis did, who began teaching at roughly the time Jesus did, and really came into their own after the Temple was destroyed in AD 70, when the question of how you lived your life became, of necessity, more important than how you worshipped in the particular place that had been the Temple.

And who is the greatest rabbi?

Well, I think that Jesus is.

Mary Magdalene does, after all, call Him *rabbouni* in the garden, after His resurrection, doesn't she?

And when Jesus says to the Pharisees that the two greatest commandments are to '*love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind*'; and, to '*love your neighbour as yourself*', Jesus is not saying anything *new*, but He is interpreting those 613 laws, and He is bringing the Jewish law together into precisely the kind of general principles we need to know in order to live well; to put the laws into action in such a way that helps them to make sense.

And what do you think it looks like to do what Jesus commands us?

To love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.

And to love your neighbour as yourself?

Well, it is to embody the Law, to embody Scripture, to embody Jesus Christ. To live them.

The Pharisees misunderstand, and get caught up in the precise meaning of each rule.

And yet Jesus shows us the point of the Law.

And He doesn't really just give us two rules that are the most important two.

He makes us see that the way we treat others, our neighbours, is part and parcel of loving God, because our neighbour, like ourselves, is made in the image of God.

So, all of this is bound up in worshipping God.

Properly speaking, it is all part of the same thing.

It is, in fact, very simple.

In our first reading, from Leviticus, we are told, '*You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.*'

And this flows naturally through a series of rules – 'treating all equally' chief among them – to '*love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord.*'

That last one I find particularly striking:

'Love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord.'

Loving your neighbour and submitting to God just go together; no explanation needed. They are all part of being holy, and we are told that we shall be holy because God is holy.

Not, you might, with a fair wind in your sail, become holy, but 'you shall be holy'.

But how do we *get* there?

It seems a hopeless task doesn't it? How many of you are holy? Seriously, put your hand up if you are?

...

Well, I'd say a few more than that, but it's also fair to say that we can never *fully* achieve holiness in this lifetime.

We can never rest and say, '*Phew, I've done it!*'

And, 'holiness'? Is that the right thing to aim for?

Surely that's just for monks and nuns, for saints?

The rest of us will be doing quite well enough if we can be kind, gentle, loving, *nice* people.

But if you think that, then you'd be wrong. For we are all called to holiness.

When St Benedict wrote his rule for his monks to live by, in the sixth century, he tried to devise a pattern of life which would help them to become holy. To us it might seem like the hardest, most rigorous regime we can imagine.

Yet, he says at the end of it that he wrote it so that *'we may demonstrate that we are to some extent living virtuously and have made a start on the religious life.'*

He then concludes: *'whoever you are then, who are hurrying towards the heavenly country, observe this little rule for beginners which I have written with*

Christ's help, and then with God's protection you will at last reach the greater heights of wisdom and virtue I mentioned earlier in this work.'

And what is at the heart of his rule? What can we, who do not live in monasteries, learn from it?

Well, it is fundamentally about living in a steady rhythm, in community, with regular prayer and the reading of scripture at its heart. It's quite simple really.

And letting those things *change* us, *mould* us.

You don't become holy just by closing your eyes and trying hard; you become holy by practice, by doing,

by living it; and, where you go wrong, by beginning again, and again, and again, with a lot of grace.

Our rhythm of Morning and Evening Prayer and Mass, in *our* community, is a direct descendant of St Benedict's rule.

We pray, maybe not seven times a day, but at least regularly, and hopefully daily. And as part of that rhythm we are immersed in scripture, and we let it change us, in the power of the Spirit.

When Jesus answered the Pharisees' questions, He stumped them because for Him, the Jewish Law – Torah - was not just one big set of rules, but all part of a way of living for God; of living holy lives, for Him, and through Him; and for each other.

We know that Jesus was immersed in scripture from a young age – he taught the elders in the Temple and astounded them.

We have the same calling. Whatever your life, whatever your work or your other commitments, make prayer and the reading of scripture its core. Immerse yourself in it; immerse yourself in God.

And, one day at a time, we will all become holy. For that is our calling; each and every one of us.

Nothing less. That is *our* purpose.

You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.

And what better day to begin than today? Amen