



Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

20th February 2011

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18, Psalm 119:33-40, 1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23, Matthew 5:38-48

In the name of God, Father, son and Holy Spirit, Amen

The books of the Bible are each written from quite different perspectives; we often tend to think of the Bible as a book or as two books, but rather it's a collection of books written by different peoples, in different times and for different audiences. Yet within them they seek to illuminate a common thread, to bring to light that which is not entirely evident in the every-day.

Paul, in addressing his community at Corinth, gives an illustration of a process whereby his community might continue to develop and grow, and so come into their fullness. It is an illustration we can also appreciate today in this community of St Paul's. That same process is also there for our reading and hearing the words of our sacred texts. Paul says in verses 10 and 11, *"like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid"*. This is true of this community just as it was for the community in Corinth. It is also true of the process by which we apprehend the word of God in the Bible. The books of the Bible provide us with a foundation, and we must choose *with care* how we will build on that foundation. The crusades, slavery, the inquisition, gas chambers, apartheid, the ghettos of the Gaza strip, the invasion of Iraq, border security, the persecution of homosexuals, the devaluing of women, and many other of life's givens have all 'with care' been built upon the wisdom of sacred texts.

When, like today, we read commandments from the book of Leviticus, and there are some 613 specific commandments in the Torah, the first five Old Testament books (luckily we didn't go through the whole lot!), when we read them we could easily assume that these teachings are about 'what we should do', and probably in many churches throughout the ages that's exactly how they've been presented. However, the scriptures, overall, are more about our being, our becoming and our belonging. To read the scriptures is to look deeply at ourselves, and to look for a reflection of ourselves that enables us to see the 'image of God'. The Bible, however, is not a shaving mirror in which to tidy up and change our image, it is an eternal pool that holds our reflection, together with the reflection of each and every life. When we look into that eternal pool we seek to truly see ourselves, and to see that self in God's image. Always there will that which we will want to see and that which we will want to turn away from. And that's probably why there are so many entry points and exit points as we gaze into the words of the sacred texts. How many times have we sat in a service and something captivated us from the readings then we heard something else and we just left – didn't hear the rest of it. The commandments that fill the book of Leviticus are pronounced as the word of God, as are the sacred texts: *"The LORD spoke to Moses, saying..."*

However, if we look at little more deeply at the book of Leviticus, its purpose was to establish a “Priestly Code”, which describes the details of rituals and of worship; it also seeks to provide a ‘Holiness Code’, those commandments intended not just for the priests but for the whole congregation. Once we see Leviticus in that light we see it as a guide for cultic practices associated with the worship of God. The Anglican Church produces them – the Articles of Faith, the Book of Statutes. These again are clear instructions as to how the priest functions in the community and how the community should then function. The book of Leviticus is there for the ordering of community or collective life, and therefore, in its writing, it will draw on the status quo of the day as a reference point for its interpretation of Divine Truth. If I were seeking to write a book on how we should order ourselves in worship I would have to take into account where you are in the present; likewise the book of Leviticus. Now many of the commandments make as much sense today as they did in their original context; some, however, will make no sense - they no longer find a reference point in the present. We need to read sacred texts in the light of today’s reference points and in the light of where we are, and following Paul, *Each builder must choose with care how to build on what they have read.*

It makes reading the scriptures much more exciting; it makes reading them much more relevant. A simple example, Moses is told to ‘*Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel*’. Some, particularly those living in Israel, still interpret this text as meaning that God will speak through Moses to them, to *the people of Israel*. Just think of the process of God making that selection – ‘no, I’m not going to talk to the Aussies, and the Germans you wouldn’t bother with at all, the Irish wouldn’t understand... ah, the people of Israel.’ We, however, might validly read the same text but interpret the text more creatively; “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying make manifest my wisdom *to the whole of humanity*”. And even more creatively we can even interpret the person of Moses: “The Lord spoke *to those who sought to hear*, saying make manifest my wisdom in the whole of humanity”.

All the Gospel writers and Paul found permission to interpret again the sacred texts, the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures, and they received that permission through the life and the light of Christ. Matthew has Jesus saying “*You have heard that it was said,..... But I say to you,*” – a reinterpretation to bring that foundation, to build on it so the reference points are in the present. And Paul chooses to build ‘with care’ on the foundations past “*According to the grace of God given to me*”. Paul actually has an awareness of God’s grace in him *that enables him to build on the foundation of the sacred texts*. We are called to do the same, to look again and again into the pool of eternal truth and give voice to *the grace of God given to each of us*. To speak into being and go beyond what we have previously heard, to give voice to a new life direction that, like Christ, has as a foundation the fullness of life for the whole of humanity.

If we read today’s readings once more, looking for ourselves reflected in the text, we find an amazingly affirming reflection of who we are: *You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy*. No one else that’s spoken to, we need to hear that for ourselves – *you shall be holy for I the LORD your God am holy*.

Do you not know that you are God's temple - you are God's temple - and that God's Spirit dwells in you? For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

For all things are yours --all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

If we can see ourselves reflected in these texts, then perhaps also we will glimpse a reflection of each and every other in the same texts. To know yourself as holy, with the same holiness as “*the Lord your God*” takes you beyond the identity you wear everyday. To know that “*you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you*” gives shape and presence to your holiness. It gives you a location of holiness in yourself, a holiness we normally attribute only to Christ. The text says it's there; look for your reflection in the text.

To “*be perfect.... as your heavenly Father is perfect*” gives us an arrow of purpose for every movement and every moment, an arrow of purpose that orientates us toward the Divine. And when doubt seeks to diminish our Divine reflection, it's good to know that “*all things are yours --all belong to you, and you belong to Christ*” – there is an empowering that calls us to give from the abundance of our being and no longer be confined by that smallness we so often hang on to.

Christ knew this Divine reflection for himself, as did Paul; they moved beyond the 613 commandments that were laid as a foundation. They built with care, creating new possibilities and realising new potentialities. We should seek to do the same, for we are both the Body of Christ and we are the Community of St Paul's. What they saw reflected echoes in and through our image. *You have heard that it was said* - well what do you say? What do we now say? What is it we will build on what was said before?

Today I invite you to leave the church through the sanctuary doors, to leave the church through the chapel of prayer, to acknowledge that we choose to go out in a different way to how we came in. To go beyond the altar, to go beyond the place of communion and walk in the direction of the rising sun[son].... Become aware of the newness we have created, of the newness that we do create; become aware that we have built on a foundation, and the foundation stands, it remains unchanged, and yet there is a new wholeness that says more, that speaks more. Let us walk into the newness that we have created that is built on the foundation of the Church, built on the community of St Paul's, at Corinth and here.

The Lord be with you
Peter Humphris.