

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany 19 Feb 2017

[Leviticus 19: 1-2, 9-18; Psalm 119: 33-40; 1 Corinthians 3: 10-17; Matthew 5:38-48](#)

Vanderbilt Lectionary Readings

[Epiphany 7A February 19, 2017](#) Textweek

In today's reading; what was it that Paul saw, but didn't know that he saw it? The writers of Leviticus, the writers of the Hebrew Torah, the books of the law, they managed to write down some 613 commandments; but they wrote something else and never realised its importance, what was that? And in Today's gospel Jesus teaches something that the disciples may have glimpsed, but together with the Church, never really understood; what is this teaching of Jesus that has been missed by the Church for such a long time?

Let's start with Paul and today he offers a metaphor for us and for the Church as a "building"; if we remember last week he used a different metaphor; here's a recap from last week's reading:

"I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. 7 So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth..... For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building."

So, Last week he talks of us being a planted field and this week a building

The metaphors are being used to teach the Church that it should continue the work that Paul, and Apollos have initiated together: Paul has planted, i.e. founded the church at Corinth, and Apollos has watered, i.e. nurtured the community. Paul now likens the growth of the church to constructing a building. He founded the community properly, he laid the foundations and now others must construct the building above the foundation.

What Paul perhaps missed in his teaching is the very real truth that change will therefore come and must come, for he pictures others building on, and above the foundations that he has laid.

Pause and consider our tradition, in fact consider all of the major religious traditions and the one thing they have in common is an inbuilt resistance to change.

The foundations laid out in the bible, in the Hebrew Torah and the Old and New Testaments are re-laid over and over again, for we have been told that they are the complete picture; we deny the very reality of Paul's metaphors that speak of growth and building; it is as if the Church has no idea of evolution, and no idea that the future offers us new insights in every moment.

Paul loved the law, he was passionate about his faith and his religious tradition; much of his teaching re-lays the same self-righteous know-it-all foundations that he knew well from his reading of the Torah; and yet in his metaphors he introduces a reference point for God that is to be found in the future, and in building beyond the foundations of the past.

He makes another, maybe unconscious, revelation at the end of today's text:

"For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple";

Paul seeks to underline a point he is making and at the same time he places a new course of teaching on the past foundation; he brings the God from the venerated heavenly Jerusalem, the God of the Torah, the God who is above and beyond all of creation, and locates that same God in us, in each and all of us.

When we look at the first reading from one of the central books of the Old Testament 'law' we should know that we are reading through a book of instructions that was thought to be the divine commands of God.

And as the writers are spelling out the 613 commandments, that include God's preference for a particular fad diet, we discover something quite out of place;

"Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy."

Almost a giveaway line that says:

"You shall be...[as] I am"; "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy";

and therefore what of the 613 commandments, where are they really from; and what is their purpose?

Perhaps, quite rightly they were a foundation, they were a starting point rather than the end point, they were a beginning on which we build and grow. Every other discipline, in medicine, education, the sciences, every other discipline has built on its foundations, and yet all the major religions seem intent on re-laying theirs.

The writers of Leviticus slipped in, like Paul did, a reference point for God that is to found in the future, and building beyond the foundations of the past;

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

Going beyond the foundations of Leviticus we are called to realise our very Holiness and to discover for ourselves and for humanity that:

"You shall be...[as] I am".

And now to the gospel and to look at what is the teaching of Jesus that has been missed by the Church for such a long time?

Again, like in the reading from Paul, we have two examples of enlightenment, two courses of bricks that have been added to the foundations, and yet both remain unseen by those intent on re-laying the foundations.

Like us, Jesus was quite familiar with the two great commandments,

"You shall love the Lord your God"

and

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

These are well known and often recited foundations of our faith; in fact they are echoed in every major religious tradition.

Most of us know these and know that Jesus taught them, and both are found in the foundations of the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18, these are two very important cornerstones in the foundations.

Quite rightly the Church reiterates these over and over again; however in the gospel today we clearly find Jesus building on these foundations in verse 44:

“I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”

And most of us have very little appreciation of what this new teaching entails, for we’ve done the Church thing of re-laying foundations rather than building on what has already been laid.

And then, just as in the reading from Paul we have another insight that goes way beyond the foundations that have been laid:

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

A very clear and concise new layer of bricks that goes beyond worshipping God; it builds beyond a God who is far away and distant and almighty for it speaks of a God that we can “be”.

So focussed was the Church on re-laying foundations that it cemented the teacher into foundations and started worshipping him, completely missing the new course of bricks that he himself was seeking to add to the structure.

There is a movement from Love your neighbour to love your enemy, and there is a movement from worshipping God to “being”

“perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

There is a movement illuminated in all three readings today

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

God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

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

You can only throw a 15 year old boy who is gay off a tall building by reference to a past and primitive foundation; but that will not create holiness.

You can only build walls and imprison refugees with reference to a past tribal understanding of the world, and that too will not make the temple holy.

And when we wonder about loving our enemies, we most probably don’t feel we have that many.

Perhaps we should think globally and wonder what 90% of the world think of us and the wealth that we are unwilling to share.... Then perhaps we might very much engage this new teaching on their behalf and in reference to ourselves.

The God that is spoken of in today’s readings is the God we might seek and find, for God always calls in the present and the activity of God is the unfolding of creation in love, and so God is very much a to be encountered and not a relic that has already been buried in the foundations or written about in an ancient text...

The past is only a foundation; tomorrow is a realisation.

Tomorrow

You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.
God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.
Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Peter Humphris