

Mark Twain once said this about the Bible: "I have no problem with those parts of the Bible I don't understand. It's those parts of the Bible I do understand that gives me problems." The passage that we are going to study certainly fits into that category.

This passage illustrates something I expect most of us have never thought about before. One of the easiest things in the world to do is to become a Christian. It is really easy. All you have to do is confess you are a sinner, repent of your sin, believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross for your sin and was raised from the dead, and surrender your life to Him as your Lord and Saviour; and you become a Christian immediately and instantaneously. There is not an easier thing in the world than to become a Christian. But at the same time, one of the most difficult things in the world is to be a Christian, and we're going to see that illustrated this morning.

In the passage in Matthew we are presented with the picture of Jesus sitting on a hillside, sitting in the posture assumed by teachers of the law, in front of his disciples and a great crowd. As he looked out we can imagine he saw thousands of people who had been brought up in a society full of rules. He knew that they were all conversant with the laws of the Old Testament, the Torah. He knew that the Scribes and Pharisees held them under control by their demands and their literal interpretation of the scriptures.

But, like the people who sat in front of Christ that day, we know that we all are creatures of our environment and our experience, just like the disciples were, as were the crowd sitting and standing around Jesus.

I was brought up on the west of Scotland in a small industrial town of about 3000 people. We knew many people in the town and as I

was brought up through school, church, the Boys Brigade and the influence of my Christian parents and their friends I understood the way I was expected to behave and what was expected of me. The society I entered had rules that were understood, but perhaps not written down. On Sundays we were not allowed to play outside with our friends. We were expected to work hard at school. We were expected to wear uniform to school and Sunday Best on Sunday to go to church, often twice. It was always made clear to us what we had to do to fit into the society we were part of. The rules were clear.

Clear also was the attitude and example of my parents. My father worked hard as a minister to support the people of the town in both their times of joy and in their moments of desperation. He was open to all who were in need and he and my mother worked as a team within their community to live out their Christian lives through example to others and to my brothers and me. It was amazing how many letters of appreciation my mother received after my father died describing the support my father had given and how he had touched people's lives

I had two examples, the society I was raised within and the witness of the way my parents reacted to their calling.

The people who listened to Jesus had been brought up within the Jewish tradition and had learned all of the rules and regulations that had been developed over the years by the Scribes and the Pharisees. They knew all the rules of what they should eat and what they should not eat. Who you could do business with and who you should ignore. What is clean and what was unclean. They knew the Old Testament Law, but perhaps didn't understand all of the teaching.

It included

When we look at the reading from Leviticus we get a rather different view of the Torah, the Jewish Law. Leviticus was written to set out the duties of the Levites, those who served within the Tabernacle. This morning in the reading I will describe three different aspects of this law.

Firstly, we read through it, we see another description of the commandments that God gave Moses. It sets out the basic code of morality for the people to follow, the commandments well known to us; do not kill, do not steal and all the others. It mentions nothing here about ritual law or the detail of the law that developed over the centuries.

Secondly, in the middle of the list of God's Commandments, the people are told not to reap right up to the edge of the field, but to leave a portion untouched a portion that can be harvested by the poor. They are also reminded not to go over their vineyard a second time, but to leave the later grapes that can be collected when ripe by the poor and needy. This sounds a little different from not killing or stealing, so what is it all about?

It is all about looking after the poor, those less well off in society. Making sure that those who are hungry, those who are without a means of earning, the widows and the poor can benefit from the harvest. Here in the middle of the traditional Old Testament rules, God is explaining to the people that as well as rules to follow, there is a conduct that they are expected to follow. They have responsibilities to the poor and the needy. This unconditional behaviour of ensuring support is often much harder than the easy behaviour of simply following rules. Following rules need take no thought or imagination. Seeking out the needs of others is much more challenging, especially when it comes at a cost to us.

Thirdly, we recognise a commandment that we often think only appears within the New Testament. 'Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself.'

Again, the people are being shown the context within which the law should be applied. The application of the law was not as simple as some made out. It was made much more challenging by applying it within the context of loving your neighbour. Again, it is simple to blindly apply the law to someone we have no relationship with; much more difficult to be judgemental about someone we love or respect.

The people who sat in front of Jesus knew the law. They had been raised in a society with the law at the centre. They understood the traditions of the Jewish race and were proud of their inherited heritage. - There is a saying that Inherited Tradition can imply that we have simply been doing it wrong for a long time.

Then Jesus sits on the Mount facing the people and challenges them to question their understanding and priorities. To remind them of the simpler, more important, relationship between God and Humanity that was not confused with complex rules and traditions. To explain the simple and challenging behaviour based on love, respect and grace.

Jesus talks to the people about their responsibilities and the rights of the poor. He takes the law and applies it in a very different way. Perhaps truer in the way that was one really intended in Leviticus. Jesus shows the difference between the Hard application of love and respect and the Easy application of blind rules.

Here Jesus challenges the Eye for an Eye and the Tooth for a Tooth convention. We interpret these rules as unacceptable. We should, however, remember that in the Old Testament, when these rules were created, the concept was to control escalation. If someone was wronged, then the reaction should not be greater than the original act. If someone hit someone on the cheek, then the retaliation should be no greater than striking them, in the same way on the cheek. It should not be taking out a dagger and stabbing them. When we look at it in that context, we see an underlying logic to the principles.

Jesus was, however, showing that the love we share with God is much more complex than simply applying rules. When we interact with those around us, we need to do so with love and with understanding. The love of the individual as a child of God and to have an understanding of the situation the person is in when they carry out whatever act they do, when they appear to wrong us or break the rules of society.

Georges Clemenceau was twice the prime minister of France, and played a major role in the treaties that concluded WWI. At the Versailles conference, Clemenceau was on his way to a meeting with President Woodrow Wilson's adviser when he was shot at by a young anarchist named Emile Cottin. As Clemenceau's car sped away Cottin fired at least six more shots, one of which struck Clemenceau near his heart. Cottin was captured and the death penalty demanded, but Clemenceau asked for leniency, recommending eight years in prison "with intensive training in a shooting gallery."

Clemenceau understood the meaning of grace and the need to forgive. The perpetrator still required punishment; but he did not require the 'eye for an eye' type; he needed rehabilitation.

So what does this mean to us? How should we interpret this teaching in our lives and how should we react to these readings?

Jesus is showing us that we need to understand our neighbour; those around us, those we work with, those we socialise with and those we come into contact with. We need to understand what their needs are and how we can help them. Jesus taught that in many ways it does not really matter what the rules are, it is only too easy to blindly live by the rules. What is imperative is how we interact with our fellow humans. How we show our love of God, how we show the love of our neighbour. How we try to understand the situation that our neighbours are in. Why they act and react as they do. This is not simple, and it can often be simpler to ignore it to apply the law, live by the rules and demand our rights. That is not the way of Christ and it is not what Jesus taught on that hillside.

Sometimes we need to treat our attitudes as we would tend a garden. At times we must find the weeds and take them out, so that the flowers or the vegetables can grow. In our lives we must remove the attitudes that separate us from our neighbours and once we have identified and removed these poor attitudes, our understanding and love will increase, especially with those we really do not understand.

This is not always easy. I remember years ago whilst at university I read a popular Christian book called *The Cross and the Switchblade*, written by David Wilkinson. It told the true story of Wilkerson's first

five years in New York where he ended up ministering to disillusioned youth, encouraging them to turn away from the drugs and gang violence they were all involved with. It would have been simple for David as a minister, a key member of society, to phone the police and ensure the youth served the necessary punishment for the crimes that they were committing. It was harder for David to listen to God's leading and to show Christian love to those hard young men and to change their lives.

I mentioned at the introduction that Mark Twain commented on the difficulties of following the parts of the bible he understood. This morning we have reflected on a passage that is well known to us. A passage that reminds us to love our neighbours and to love our enemies. To apply the simple rule of love and grace, rather than the complex rules and traditions of society. To do that we must see people in the same way that God sees looking straight into the heart of an individual. We should not see people in a way that is confused by our background and situation. We need remove these barriers in our lives. When we do see people for what they really are, for who they really are, then we can demonstrate the love that Jesus showed us, the love that we are shown in Leviticus. The love that helps the poor and needy. The love that helps to change life and bring people to meet God. That way we follow the teaching of Jesus sitting on a hillside 2000 years ago.

It is easy to become a Christian, much harder to love your neighbour and to love your enemy.

Let us pray,

Creator God, when you created us you did so in your image. Since then we have managed to separate ourselves from your way and to

depend more on the history and traditions of the human race rather than the love that you have shown us. We ask that we will seek the simple understanding of love that you explained that day on the hillside, so that we can meet our neighbour in the same way as you met the people on that hillside and that we can remove our prejudices and show the same love, grace and understanding that you did.