

## JESUS THE LAW BREAKER

**PREACHER : The Revd Rob Ryan, Cathedral Curate**

Sunday, June 20<sup>th</sup> 2010

**Trinity 3**

Luke 8:26-39 and Galatians 3: 23-29

10.30am

Rochester Cathedral

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A few weeks ago I was seen in Wetherspoons. Not unusual for your pioneer curate! I was seen sitting with a young woman at 10.30 - again not that unusual. This woman, I shall call her Christine, was very loud and offensive - well that turned a few heads. But, ok, ... someone needed to sit with her. She was fairly drunk at 10.30 ... are you sure that someone should have been you?? I was seen sitting and smiling with this attractive young lady who was wearing, shall we say minimal clothing who was very loud and very sexual in her language. She was not quiet or shy! I, a bloke in a dog collar sat with her for a while and people looked .... what did they think? what do you think? what was I thinking? I'll return to Christine later.

The gospel reading today is pretty shocking, but because we don't get the context I think we miss this. It's shocking simply because Jesus gets out of the boat. Any good law abiding Jew would have stayed in that boat and not set foot on this soil. Jewish rules were obsessed with cleanliness and holiness. Touching or being in the vicinity of 'unclean' things or places required you to spend time becoming clean again - this time could range from the minimal few hours 'until evening' to many weeks. In this gospel account there is so much here to defile and make Jesus dirty that he would have had to become a recluse for months before he would be viewed as clean again.

Jesus steps out of the boat onto Gentile soil and immediately this naked demon possessed man charges up to him. Not only was this person a Gentile, a non-Jew, (which classified him as unclean to start with), he was naked ( unclean grade 2), he was demon possessed (unclean grade 3 and 4) and he lived in the tombs, with the dead .... this guy is seriously shooting off the unclean scale. Seriously the Pharisees would have been blowing gaskets over this. According to them and their laws, Jesus was bordering on unclean beyond redemption.

The rules forbade interaction on any level. To become involved here would result in becoming defiled, unclean, dirty. Jesus even involves himself with pigs - anyone and everyone knows Jews and pigs just don't mix! The Jesus actions of this whole scene are quite shocking.

If we just had read on to verse 40, the next verse, it seems to get even worse. Here we read 'now when Jesus returned, the crowd welcomed him.' Jesus crosses the stormy lake (this immediately follows Jesus being woken up in the boat and calming the storm) to the place Jews don't go, heals this screaming naked possessed man who has been living with the dead and then just crosses the treacherous lake again. It kind of makes you think he went just for that man. He doesn't hang around, he heals the guy, gives him his mission charge, and then he comes back. A treacherous journey across the lake for this one man, and then he simply returns. Jesus knew the rules. He knew the law, he knew what others would say - and yet he got on it with it.

Jesus came, the gospels tell us, to fulfil the law. This does not mean the law is now useless, but it does mean things have changed. The role of the law has changed, and Jesus' actions give us clues to what those changes are.

Paul understands and helps us out in Galatians. Again this reading needs to be heard in context. Jesus has preached freedom. Jesus death gives freedom from the law. But ... these new Christians in Galatia have been under pressure from Jewish Christians. To be really saved, the voices tell them, to be a

proper 'child of God' they needed to follow the old rules and have the same sign of the covenant that they had - they needed to be circumcised. Not your best and most attractive evangelistic statement! Can't see that strategy working too well to be honest! Baptism alone is the sign, says Paul. Not only less painful - but also more inclusive ... as well as good news for me as I did not become a Christian until I was 17!

But in seriousness, Paul gives us a great image here with the language he uses. In verse 24 he refers to the law as our disciplinarian. The Greek word here, *paidagogos*, is translated as a custodian or escort for children. Paul encourages us to think of the the law as the governess type character. Maybe someone like Mary Poppins or nanny McPhee. The person with responsibility for training the children in certain ways. The role of the governess is to prepare for a time - the time, as v 24 goes on to say, is until Jesus comes.

That time has come. Jesus came. Jesus is still here. Now the focus is not the law, the focus should be on the transformational relationship we can have with Jesus. This relationship with Jesus results in us becoming more like Jesus, and the gospels give us a good guide to what Jesus was like.

The law and Jesus cannot exist side by side. The idea, says Paul, is bizarre. Can you imagine a grown up child taking their governess to an interview, to their wedding for guidance, or even on their honeymoon. Of course not! The person would still have a respect for their governess, but there would be an understanding that that role has its place in history. So does the law.

But we have a problem. The early Christians of Galatia have the problem, and I believe we have the very same problem today. Jesus gave us freedom because the law does not work and what do we do? .... we write a new law. We develop a new set of rules. We can't cope with freedom because it terrifies us! We may not bring back the circumcision law but I see other unwritten laws - laws that tell us how to dress in church, where and how to be seen in public, laws governing what we should think, how we should worship, what we should listen to.

I don't know if you have seen the film Nanny McPhee. In many ways it is an update of Mary Poppins and has a similar ending. But Nanny McPhee's words sum up the law: 'when you don't want me, but you need me, then I will stay. But; when you want me, but no longer need me, then I must go.'

We no longer need the law...but we want it back. If we are honest, it is far easier and safer to deal with a set of rules and regulations than it is to deal with God. Following rules requires conformity which we are comfortable with. We like to be part of the crowd.

Jesus was never part of the crowd. He stood out. He stood up. He spoke out.

The rule keepers in the gospels are the Pharisees. They keep the letter of the law, but have no compassion for real people. Jesus speaks harshly to the Pharisees because they had forgotten that God is love. Jesus was no Pharisee. He was no rule keeper! If we take the gospels seriously, to be Christlike means non-conformity. It means compassion, not rules.

Recently I have been comparing Jesus and the church side by side and it breaks my heart. I started to think like this after my encounters with Christine. - that attractive, promiscuous, drunken young lady I spoke of earlier. Christine is just 30. She is an alcoholic. She's fairly promiscuous. She dresses provocatively. She has already tried rehab 3 times and failed. The first 2 times she saw me she threatened to hit me. The third time she wanted to talk. Each time she was too drunk, even at 10am, to even remember that she had ever seen me before; each time asking 'are you a priest?'

She chatted to me about her problems and you know ... I could feel the eyes of people staring at me. A hush descended in some areas. Some Christians that I vaguely knew came in and the look they gave was cutting. It said it all - what sort of person hangs out with a girl like that. But it wasn't just them, it was a significant majority of people. 'Call yourself a vicar' .... 'just look at him with her' .... 'what sort of person hangs us with something like that!'

You know, it shames me to say that I struggled and wanted to run out of that pub. I could even justify the running away - surely by staying I was bringing the church into disrepute. what would they say at the cathedral. what if the new bishop hears - actually the bishop would understand ... but my mother in law??? what if... what if ....

I stayed, but only just.

At home, I turned to the gospels and I read of the 'law breaking' Jesus who hung out with sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, those with diseases - the untouchables and marginalised of society. I don't want you to think I am bigging myself up as something special here - I'm not. As I read the gospels and reminded myself of the sort of Jesus I followed I realised something that brought me up short. I realised that I did run out of w/spoons that day. I mentally ran from Christine as fast as my imaginary legs would take me. Jesus sat with her because I spent my time worrying what people were thinking. I can't even remember a lot of what she said. You see if you worry about laws, you miss the person. If you think about 'rules' you forget we worship a God of love.

I said that recently I have been looking at Jesus and looking at the church and it breaks my heart. Why? What did I mean?

We are called to be Christlike. Jesus attracted the outcasts of society. He actually, as we saw today, went looking for them. They loved being in his company and he in theirs. Yet these kinds of people do not want to hang out with us through fear of judgement. If we were Christlike, they would. Simple logic.

That they don't should disturb us - but I don't think it does - and that disturbs me more. I wonder if we actually go out of our way to avoid those on the margins of our society? Have we allowed our laws of respectability to get in the way of our compassion and love? I fear that we have and it is only us, each of us individually, that can do anything about that. And we can because we are free!

The law and rules have prepared us and are now a thing of the past.

Do we use that freedom in a Christlike way, in a way of love and compassion that does not worry about reputation ... or do we run from it and create new rules to hide behind?

'when you don't want me, but you need me, then I will stay. But; when you want me, but no longer need me, then I must go.'

What if we dare to let the rules go and take up the relationship with Christ? Maybe the time has come to let go of our rules and to follow Christ the lawbreaker.