**
10th September 2017
Romans 13.8-14

 Rules are rules?**

*Gracious God, we thank you for your word in scripture and made flesh in the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us now to catch your voice and speak, we pray, to our hearts and minds. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*

‘Rules are rules’!

How many times have I heard myself say that to our children!

Rules give us security because they order our lives in a commonly accepted way. When someone breaks the rules, we can feel vulnerable and threatened.

So, we have rules for how we drive our cars, order our money, act in public or even behave in church.

Over the summer on a visit to Salisbury we popped into this charming courtyard of ancient Alms-houses with their own minute private Anglican chapel at one end. Time has stood still here and it felt as if Jane Austen might walk in at any moment. The chapel was decorated in such a stern, plain way, save for two huge boards either side of the altar elaborately listing the Ten Commandments. Such a sight in churches is not uncommon because for centuries this was the only wall decoration permitted. So, for hundreds of years the single visual in a Parish Church was a list of rules.

And maybe it’s an understandable, yet deeply flawed, idea to view the Bible as simply a Constitution or rule book. So, we end up quoting its instructions out of context rather than working hard to understand what type of literature we are actually reading.

Well, I suspect that Paul, in today’s second lesson, wants to challenge the idea that ‘Rules are rules’ and must be obeyed at all costs.

Paul knew a thing or two about rules because of his background; he had trained as a Pharisee and this is how he summarises that past in Philippians chapter three: I was circumcised on the eighth day, Israelite by race…in my practice of the Law a Pharisee, in zeal for religion a persecutor of the church, by the law’s standard of righteousness without fault. And in Acts 22 this is what he says of his teacher: I was brought up in the city of Tarsus as a pupil of Gamaliel and I was thoroughly trained in every point of our ancestral law. Quite a CV!

That ancestral law was complicated and possibly all consuming.

The Torah, the first five books of the Jewish Scriptures has 613 commandments, not just 10! It was said there were 365 negative commands, one for every day of the year, and 248 positive commands, one for every bone in the body!

And if this wasn’t enough the Pharisees developed these laws, clarifying and expanding them; this was called Midrash, the practice of making a commentary on the commandments. So, take the command: Do not work on the Sabbath. That has 39 sub sections in the Midrash which define the meaning of work.

I guess, if it was your thing and you were the right personality type, these laws could capture your life and dictate almost every waking moment of your day.

Paul, then known as Saul, must have been close to this in the early part of his life – bound up with rules.

We are told that when the first Christian martyr Stephen was stoned Paul was one of the council members who authorised his execution.

When faith is primarily seen as the keeping of rules something has gone wrong. And when the seeming breaking of these rules leads to the execution of the offender something has gone seriously wrong. And this is where Paul was in his early life, besotted by rules and contemptuous of those who appeared to break them.

That is such dangerous ground to occupy.

But, of course, Paul didn’t occupy that terrain forever. En-route to Damascus he has a change of heart. It’s a eureka moment. It’s a conversion experience. It’s one of those ‘Thin Moments’ as the Celts would say, when he senses God’s presence close at hand.

He enters Damascus in peace but why would anyone in their right mind believe that? This is the infamous Saul of Tarsus who hates those who don’t keep the rules like him. A persecutor of Christians. A dangerous religious fanatic.

Well, one man in Damascus was prepared to give him a go. The brave and wonderful Ananias. God, we are told, prompted the Christian Ananias to go and welcome the Christian hater Saul to town.

Would you have gone?!

Ananias did and this is what we read in Acts 9: Ananias went to the house, laid his hands on him and said: Saul, my brother….

One of the most amazing verses in the New Testament.

Think for a moment of how this one act must have influenced Paul for the rest of his life. How this one act of acceptance must have shaped his understanding of the value of love over law.

I think Ananias is one of the heroes of Christianity and did more than he ever knew in shaping its future the day he welcomed Saul to Damascus.

In the words of a book by Rob Bell studied by our AFC Book Discussion group a little while ago: Love wins.

It seems that once Paul had experienced this love a certain liberation followed in his life. It became a life with a foundation in grace and mercy rather than law and rule keeping.

Now none of this means that Paul was suggesting we live a wishy-washy life in a moral vacuum where anything goes.

Only a few verses before the start of today’s reading he was advocating that the Romans should pay their taxes. For Paul, too had that Stoic belief in order and due process believing that society needs a working and just framework.

No, what he is talking about here surely goes deeper. It’s about our attitude and motivation. It’s also about the way we interpret the letter of the law or the essence of a constitution.

So, as he reflects of the laws of the Torah, verse 8 of Romans 13 makes this pivotal point: He who loves his neighbour has met every requirement of the law.

William Loader, the Australian bible teacher talks of Paul going ‘beyond the oughts of obligation’. I like that phrase – beyond the oughts of obligation.

So much of religion can come across as oughts and obligation instead of a liberation to live a generous and loving life with grace and mercy at the centre.

Paul was, in a way, echoing Jesus’ words when he too was challenged about his own compliance with the religious law of his day answering that the two greatest commands were to Love God and then love your neighbour as yourself.

This isn’t about taking the easier road. It’s not that a rule based belief is tough and a love based faith is soft.

Paul knows that grounding faith in an ethical lifestyle demands the best of us and that’s the reason why he ends today’s reading encouraging the Romans to behave with decency.

He knows too that in many of the churches he’s had a hand in planting all too soon factions and divisions started to appear amongst the congregation.

Yet he remains passionate in his understanding of love. He neither thinks a rule based faith expresses the essence of God and nor is enough to sustain faith. For him the essential ingredient in faith is love – but it’s tough love.

Love is often the hardest way. Love keeps on returning to the most complicated questions. Love motivates and inspires in a way that rules never could.

Isn’t that why the Apostle gives us one of the most beautiful of all poems and psalms found in scripture, the words of 1 Corinthians 13 when he says: Love is patient, kind, doesn’t boast, isn’t conceited and is never rude or selfish. It doesn’t take offence and keeps no record of wrongs. It takes no delight in sin and always delights in the truth. There is nothing love cannot face.

Now maybe if I were an RE teacher in a school I’d ask the students to write a piece comparing and contrasting the style and substance of The Ten Commandments and this poem about love in 1 Corinthians 13.

And don’t you just feel that maybe Ananias had something to do with why Paul wrote these words to the Corinthians. Isn’t this exactly the way that Paul was treated by him when he arrived in Damascus. Ananias was patient and kind with him, even with Paul’s infamous past Ananias kept no record of wrongs. It’s as if Paul’s real conversion wasn’t on the road to Damascus but in the city, itself the night he met Ananias.

Loving like this isn’t easy but it’s the way we are loved by God.

Jesus showed this sort of generosity of spirit as he reinstated Peter on the beach after the resurrection.

Ananias shows it to Paul.

And now Paul commends this way of thinking and this way of living to the Romans. How does he put it in verse 8: Leave no debt outstanding, but remember the debt of love you owe one another.

I think in my RE class I want to say at the very least that maybe as well as the 10 Commandments hanging in the Parish Church maybe it would have been even better if alongside them we also put up 1 Corinthians 13.

In a community like church or family, in our relationship with neighbours and work colleagues there will be guidelines and boundaries. Laws and constitutions will play their part and be there for the common good. But what Paul brings to the table in a passage like today’s is the attitude we need to cultivate that enables justice to be administered with mercy and rules to be applied with proportion.

Without love, mercy, grace and generosity we lack the Spirit of God in our relations with other people.

This week it will be love that motivates you to work hard at your marriage. It will be love that prompts you to keep faith with a family member who has let you down. It will be love that inspires you to reach out in friendship to a neighbour who is unreasonable.

I must close.

When I was a student in London I often worshipped at All Soul’s Church beside the BBC in Regent’s Street. I wasn’t the only one, normally there was about a thousand student types there every Sunday morning. We were a disparate lot coming from all parts of the country and beyond. Richard Bewes was the Rector and he was like an Ananias to us. He showed us Jesus in the way he spoke and acted week by week. He bound us together as a community in central London with his gracious welcome. Every time I went to All Souls I sensed something of the love of God and it made my heart glad.

One morning, about ten minutes into the service about twenty people tumbled into the gallery. They squashed their way in, tripping up over people already seated as they tried to find a place. It wasn’t dignified, church started at 11, what were they doing turning up and disturbing everything so noisily at 10 past.

Richard Bewes didn’t look up and glare at them, he just said – Welcome friends, I heard there were problems on the Tube this morning, you are not late, you are delayed!

I knew the significance and depth of generosity in those words. He needn’t have said them, what was 20 more people in a congregation of a thousand. But that’s not how he thought. He wanted to go further than the rules of good time keeping – by the welcome he gave that morning he showed something of the grace and kindness of God. And perhaps it’s not surprising I don’t remember his sermon that day, but his welcome left an indelible mark on my soul.

Paul’s word to us this morning: Leave no debt outstanding, but remember the debt of love you owe to one another. Or as he said in 1 Corinthians 13: There is nothing love cannot face.

And, as ironic as it may sound, isn’t such a bad rule for life.

May such love flourish and be a blessing in our lives and communities. In the name of The Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.
 *Ian Green, Amersham, 8th September 2017*