

St Peter's, Ealing  
Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> November 2015  
All Saints' Day

Love not law?

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Each of today's readings reflect the changing relationship between God and God's people. The passages each redefine how the people of God engage with the Divine and how we understand the place and role of God in creation; how ultimately through Jesus, love becomes the basis of salvation.

It should be said at the outset that God's chief desire is always for a good and meaningful relationship with God's people. Initially this was through the covenants made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the patriarchs of the Old Testament. A relationship built on trust and promise and a personal relationship with God. With the slavery of their descendants in Egypt and the breaking down of that relationship, a new relationship based upon the freedom of God's people and the foundation of the legal covenant through the Torah is formed; a covenant made for the chosen people who were lead to freedom in the Promised Land.

Our first reading from Isaiah 56 finds the people of God in a different place. As part of the story of the Pentateuch we have the Hebrew people being formed into a nation. Israel, a nation built upon firstly a theocracy, then an aristocracy, now finds itself in exile, struggling to understand their relationship with God. No longer a State but a people held together by a shared faith, a series of commands and laws that bring new meaning to and understanding of God. Such a change in the relationship with God allows for even those originally rejected by the nation of Israel to be included as long as they follow the commands and obeyed the laws. Now even eunuchs and foreigners could be considered followers of the Most High God. This change in relationship based on law rather than nationhood is seen in Isaiah as the beginning of the restoration of the people of Israel, reference being made to a temple not yet rebuilt and a re-establishment of a kingdom whilst still in exile.

The Letter to the Hebrews sees this relationship with God having to a new status. The opening lines of the pericope evoke in the original readers memories of the stories of the Exodus community and their first meeting with God on Mount Sinai. The writer reminds them of the terror, the darkness, the

black void they felt and the fear that even to step on the Holy Mount meant death. The writer then takes their readers and points them through well-known apocalyptic imagery to a new way of faith. One no longer based on fear and darkness but brilliant light, a new way of faith based on the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; the same Jesus whose blood was sprinkled for them (another allusion to the old covenant maintained in the temple rituals in the earthly Jerusalem).

Each of these passages look to new beginnings in the relationship of the people to God. They point to a fresh start and a new basis. For Isaiah it is a new relationship, signified by the more open approach to the understanding of community that will be brought about when God re-establishes Israel on Mount Zion. In Isaiah the people are watching and waiting, being faithful and keeping the commands of God.

For the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews the new or heavenly Jerusalem is coming. Evoking the Old Testament images to the Exodus People emphasises the change that has happened in creation through the blood of Jesus. The writer points to the apocalyptic promise of an angelic theophany, a promise echoing through much apocalyptic scriptural texts. The writer of Hebrews does use one important phrase that grounds this description; Jesus as mediator of this new covenant. No longer is it the law or the old covenant with God but this new relationship brought about by the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that will save the us.

This moves our understanding of our relationship with God on. The writer of Hebrews makes reference to Sinai and the giving of the commands of God, those referred to in Isaiah as the new basis for defining the people of God. In the person of Jesus this all changes again. In his earthly ministry, in his death and resurrection a new relationship has been created. In Jesus, from his teachings on, we have a new foundation for our relationship with God; no longer based on fear or following rules but on Divine love. Hebrews' reference to the sprinkling of Jesus' blood not only makes reference to the temple rituals in Jerusalem, but also the love of God revealed to all creation on Easter Day.

What all this means for the followers of Jesus is itself attested to in the Gospel reading from Matthew. Matthew 5.1-12 is known, the Beatitudes, is the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. On initial reading the references made may not seem as clear as we might like. The temptation may be to ask, "Who

are those mourning; the poor in spirit or the meek?” As with much of Jesus’ teaching we begin by taking one step back from the text and look at it in a broader light.

With the Exodus people evoked in the Epistle to the Hebrews we understand a special, select group of people set aside by God and given the commands of faith. In Isaiah, now exiled, this people of God understand themselves in terms of religious observance which in itself allows previously unacceptable peoples to be included amongst the people of faith as long as they keep the commands of God and follow God’s law. Jesus’ words broaden that view of inclusion further – the meek, the poor in spirit, the persecuted – these are not defined by commands, laws or statehood; now salvation comes through the love of God, proclaimed in the words of Jesus and expressed in the cross of Good Friday and the empty tomb of Easter morning and is for all people.

What now defines this heavenly Jerusalem, this new covenant is love. Love expressed in lives lived with the light of God in their hearts. Who are these people? These are the saints, the followers of Jesus who seek always to live in God’s loving light. This is a heritage offered to us today in the sacraments of the church – the source of God’s grace and love in the community; the waters of baptism through which we are cleansed for ever and set free to serve God; the bread and wine of the Eucharistic table by which we are fed, nourished and renewed in our mission, as saints, to proclaim God’s love in the world.

Here, using the term saints in a very Pauline way we describe the people of God, the followers of Jesus and as saints we share the love of God in a world broken by poverty, oppression, violence and grief. In this mission of which we are part, we with all the saints give praise to God in the new Jerusalem, a timeless existence where death has been destroyed and hearts are filled with hope and joy at the Good News of Jesus; for the poor, the meek, the broken are blessed in God’s love and they too can now receive Jesus and be part of the heavenly Jerusalem, we can receive this Easter promise if our hearts are open to God’s love and healing power.