

**Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2024**  
**First Sunday after Trinity (B) Choral Evensong**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Jeremiah 5: 1-19**  
**NT: Romans 7: 7- end**

It is true to say that there are times when I look at the lectionary readings and wonder why me tonight is one of those times. It reminds me of the saying attributed to Mark Twain 'It ain't those parts of the bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand' W.C. Fields, the hard-drinking vaudeville comedian, had a somewhat similar quote when someone caught him reading a bible in his dressing room. When asked why, he merely replied "looking for loopholes my boy, just looking for loopholes".

This evening both of our lectionary readings leave me reflecting on some very similar thoughts and wonder why on such a beautiful early summer evening we are faced with these readings, whether the reading from Jeremiah with its title 'The utter corruption of God's people' or the reading from chapter 7 of Paul's letter to the Romans 'The Law and Sin' and its subheading 'The Inner conflict'. Readings which combined with our Psalm 35 with this line 'Let their way be dark and slippery \* and let the angel of the Lord persecute them'. Make me ask the question why me? Although I am sure that's a question which equally you have asked yourselves as you have listened to the readings! So how do we make some sense of how we are to understand the readings and what is the context for us.

It can't have escaped anyone's attention this week that the law and its implementation have featured heavily in the news both here and overseas. All of us live lives governed by laws, laws which have been established to be mutually beneficial and which in theory allow each one of us to live in society. If we do not accept that we live under the rule of law, then society is threatened. Regardless of who we are we are all subject to the law even the 45th president of the United States found that was true when at the culmination of his trial in Manhattan a jury found him guilty of 34 violations of city and federal laws and he is still subject to a number of further criminal trials which may find a similar disregard for the rule of law.

The concept of the law encompasses a broad range of definitions, theories, and interpretations, depending on the context in which it is discussed. At its core, law can be understood through several key perspectives:

The law is seen as a set of rules or norms that govern the behaviour of individuals within a society. These rules are established by legitimate authorities and are enforceable through institutions like courts.

Philosophers like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke viewed the law as part of a social contract, an agreement among individuals to form a society and abide by its rules for the benefit of all. This perspective highlights the consensual nature of legal systems.

Rooted in ancient and medieval philosophy, natural law theory posits that law is derived from moral principles inherent in human nature and the natural order. Thinkers like Aristotle and Aquinas argue that human-made laws should reflect these universal moral standards.

Other scholars like John Austin and H.L.A. Hart, asserted that law is a set of rules created by human beings and is distinct from morality. According to positivism, the validity of a law is not dependent on its moral content but on its sources and the processes through which it is enacted. A critical perspective challenges traditional notions of law by emphasizing the ways in which law is intertwined with social power and political interests. Proponents argue that law often serves the interests of dominant groups and perpetuates social inequalities.

Law serves various functions in society, such as maintaining order, resolving disputes, protecting rights, and promoting social justice. This view emphasizes the practical roles that legal systems play in facilitating social coordination and stability.

However, law is not just a set of abstract rules but is influenced by social, economic, and political factors. Legal realists argue that judges' and juries decisions are often based on personal experiences and societal context rather than purely legal reasoning, a point the 45th President tried to make in his 'press conference' following the guilty verdict.

On a global scale, international law governs the relations between sovereign states and other international actors. It encompasses treaties, conventions, and customary international law, aimed at regulating issues such as human rights, trade, and environmental protection.

Understanding the concept of the law requires recognizing these diverse perspectives and how they interact to shape the legal landscape within societies and globally.

Understanding the concept of the law shapes our response to it and ultimately how we live our lives under it.

Jeremiah prophesied in the final years of Judah before God's people were exiled to Babylon, the book's overarching theme is judgment. Indeed, the first forty-five chapters focus primarily on the judgment coming to Judah because of its disbelief and disobedience. However, an element of grace is also present in these events. Significantly, the book of Jeremiah also provides us the clearest glimpse of the new covenant God intended to make with His people once Christ came to earth. This new covenant would be the means of restoration for God's people, as He would put His law within them, writing it on hearts of flesh rather than on tablets of stone. Rather than fostering our relationship with God through a fixed location like a temple, He promised through Jeremiah that His people would know Him directly, a knowledge that comes through the person of His Son, Jesus Christ

Paul tackles the relationship between the law—the commandments given by God—and human sinfulness. He begins by making it clear that those who are in Christ have been released from any obligation to the law of Moses. This is for the same reason that we have been released from our slavery to sin: We died, and death breaks those obligations. Those who come to faith in Christ are so closely associated with His physical death and resurrection that we experience a kind of spiritual death and are resurrected into a new spiritual life. This is how we are freed from our responsibility to the law.

Earlier in the chapter Paul uses the illustration of the law of marriage. A woman whose husband has died is no longer obligated to remain faithful to him. She is free to marry another man. In a similar way, our death with Christ freed us from our obligation to the law and allows us to serve God in what Paul calls the new way of the Spirit

Some apparently thought Paul's teaching about freedom from the law meant that he believed the law itself to be sinful. He insists that he does not. Instead, it was the law that revealed his own sinfulness to him. He learned that he was covetous after being told by the law not to covet. Worse, as a sinful human being, merely knowing that covetousness was a sin made him want to covet! Our rebellious natures often choose to break rules just for the sake of breaking rules. The law promised Paul life if he could keep the commandments, but he discovered he could not do it. In that sense, the law doomed him to death. Still, though, Paul describes the law as holy, righteous, and good

Paul describes his devastating experience of wanting to do what is good and finding himself doing what is sinful instead. Bible scholars disagree about whether the picture Paul paints of this experience is describing himself before he was a Christian, when he was trying to follow the law, or whether it was a current experience of trying to do good in his own power as a Christian. Based on the Greek tenses used, Paul seems to be describing the ongoing struggle of a believer against sin, rather than something he "got over" when he was saved.

The difference between the two positions is significant, but both present biblical truths supported elsewhere in Scripture. Certainly, Paul's whole book stands on the idea that non-Christians are unable to keep the law. That's why the law cannot make us righteous before God. It is also true that Christians who have been freed from the power of sin often still find the powerful influence of sin terribly difficult to overcome. Becoming a Christian gives a person the power to overcome sin, but it does not make one sinless

Ultimately the choice is ours of how we live under the law but be prepared the choice may come with penalties.

**Fr Bill Addy**