

Virtue Ethics Quinquagesima 2010

Exodus 34 vv 29-35 p94, Ps 99, II Corinthians 3 v14 – 4 v2 p1160, Luke 9 vv 28-36 p1040

Knowing this, that the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, for unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, For whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for menstealers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine. (I Timothy 1 vv 9&10).

The law is not made for a righteous man. I want to talk today about virtue ethics. I confess I am partly inspired here by Clifford Longley's *Thought For The Day* last Monday. You see, the rules don't seem to be working. There has been the scandal of MPs' expenses. Some MPs have been caught breaking the rules and have apparently been doing so over many years. Others have tried to justify conduct which most people would regard as distasteful by claiming that it was within the rules. Either way, the rules didn't work. In the one case, the rules were not obeyed; in the other case the rules were obeyed, but they allowed people to get away with behaving unethically. We are told that the banking crisis was brought about by a failure of regulation. The regulations permitted bankers to behave greedily, stupidly and irresponsibly. The rules didn't work. Then, this very week, we have seen the conviction of a senior police officer for attempting to pervert the course of justice. One of those people responsible for enforcing the rules has been caught out breaking the law. Rules alone can't work.

Virtue ethics takes the focus off the action. It does not start with the question whether an action is right or wrong? It starts with the actor. Is the person acting a good person or a bad person? Good people do good things. Bad people do bad things. You can tell a tree by its fruit. Jesus says *Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.* (Matthew 7 v17). *The law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless.* What matters is to be a person made in the image of God, a person filled with love. It is not what you do that counts, but who you are, because if you are good you will be good. St Paul puts it like this. *Owe no man anything, but to love one another; for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.* Romans 13 vv 8&9).

We need rules because some people, many people, aren't good people and because none of us is good all of the time. If we were good people, we would always want to do what is right, but, as we are not good people, there are times when we don't want to what is right and we do want to do what is wrong. That is when we need rules and even the threat of punishment. *The law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless.*

Virtue ethics concentrates on the character. Are you virtuous or vicious? Very simply, if you want to be virtuous, you practise virtue. If you don't mind being vicious, you don't practise virtue. Practice makes perfect and, if you get into the habit of doing the right thing, it gets easier to do the right thing as you become a better person. *If thou doest well, shalt thou not*

be accepted? And if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him, as God said to Cain (Genesis 4 vv7).

There's been a lot of debate recently about whether we live in a broken society. It's hard to know. We form our own subjective impressions and subjectivity is no basis for certainty but the people who provide the statistics, the politicians and officials, are the very people we no longer trust because they have so often been caught out saying and doing what the rules might allow but what most ordinary decent people would regard as less than honest. The cynic says *You can prove anything by statistics*, and most of us half believe him. It is incontrovertible, however, that many people are bothered by the way things are in this country today. I recently had an e mail from a Moslem organisation deploring Britain's broken society and quoting a report by the Church of England Children's Society in support of their claims. Given the symptoms of a broken society, my diagnosis is that this disease is caused by a failure to develop character. People do bad things because they are bad people. They fail to do good things because they are not good people. And why do people fail to develop character? The answer is that the traditional institutions which supported the building of character are breaking down or at least changing at a rate faster than we can cope with. Our characters are developed by our families; the communities we grow up in, live in and work in; and our faith. Family, community and faith are all very much weaker than they used to be. They have less influence on individuals. They are less available to develop character. Family, community and faith have far less influence over individuals than they used to and they have far less influence on society. Government regards itself as synonymous with Society and seeks to direct the lives of families and communities and to marginalise religion.

In a secular state we have no agreed moral absolutes and the bodies which traditionally developed character – family, community and Church – are weakened relative to politics, commerce and other less positive influences. It is not therefore, in my opinion, surprising that we have shifted from virtue ethics to rule based ethics. We no longer attempt to build character. We attempt to control people by keeping them under surveillance and regulating their lives for them. There have been 3,500 new laws, we are told, since 1997 and Britain is the most watched country anywhere in the world with far more CCTV cameras per head of population than any other nation. I've mentioned before that, when I was a teenager, I carried a knife. It was part of my scout uniform. We were taught to use knives responsibly. Nowadays, teenage boys are not taught how to use knives; they are forbidden to purchase them or to carry them. Yet there is far more knife crime on the streets now than when I was a teenager.

The law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless. We need rules because people aren't good, but they are a stop gap measure. What we need is good people who will choose freely to do what is right, not bad people cowed into obedience by fear the Law. St Paul likens the Law to a school master whose task is to keep the immature from doing too much harm to themselves or to other people until they grow up and learn self-discipline and self-respect.

Rules don't work in the long term because people don't obey them or because they find they can still get away with doing wrong even without breaking the rules. There are always loopholes. If our conduct is to be controlled by rules rather than by our own consciences and common sense, we need ever more rules to cope with ever greater complexity. Hence 3,500 new rules in 13 years. However comprehensive the rules, there will always be occasions when they don't cover the exact situation. Think of those scandalous cases where the emergency services have stood back and watched someone die rather than break some *health and safety* protocol devised for entirely different circumstances.

Moreover, human law, as opposed to divine law, is necessarily enacted and enforced by fallible human beings. Our law makers and our law enforcers are people just like us. If we can't be trusted to be good, neither can they. No parliamentarian, policeman or judge can be infallible or perfect. All are capable of making mistakes. Some are likely to be incompetent. It would be surprising if, in any large group of people, some at least were not actually corrupt.

Finally and most importantly, law doesn't transform us. Law cannot make us fully human. It cannot make us divine, which is what we are called to be. We can tick all the boxes and still not be a good person, a happy person. Or, as St Paul put it more poetically, *And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.* (I Corinthians 13 v3).

There is more to developing good character than practice. The key is the contemplation of the divine. Moses' face shone when he entered the divine presence. He continued to glow when he returned to the world. Because he went into the divine presence, he mediated God's glory to the world. But Moses put on a veil. People didn't want always to be gazing at the divine glory. They hung back from being transformed again into the image and likeness of God. But St Paul speaks of the veil being taken away in Christ. If we come to Christ, we encounter the divine glory face to face. We are transformed. We are made like Him. We become love. We are set free to live by the Law of divine love, which is eternal life.

At our Lord's Transfiguration, three disciples are granted a vision of His Glory. He is transformed before them. They see Him as He really is – a foretaste of the Resurrection and Ascension into Heaven. The Body of Jesus is transformed by the Cross, the Resurrection and the Ascension. In Christ, we too are transfigured. By His Death, Resurrection and Ascension, we too are changed, no longer conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewing of our mind (Romans 12 v2). Our behaviour grows out of our character. Our character is the character of Christ. This is so because we worship Him.

Let's use the traditional collect for Quinquagesima.

O Lord, who hast taught us that all our doings without charity are nothing worth: Send thy Holy Ghost, and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of charity, the very bond of peace and of all virtues, without which whosoever liveth is counted dead before thee: Grant this for thine only Son Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.