

**Fulfilling the Law (Matthew 5.17-20)**

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Over these weeks in January, we're doing an introduction to the gospel of Matthew – the gospel set for reading in this year's lectionary. Last week, we looked at that lengthy and riveting genealogy with which Matthew begins his account of Jesus, and noted how from its beginning this gospel stresses the link between Jesus and the Jewish tradition. Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, who fulfils and sheds new light on the story of God's relationship with the Hebrew people. In Matthew's account, Jesus both completes this history *and* enables it to be appreciated in a new way.

This week, we turn to another feature of this continuity and newness with Israel's story – Matthew's depiction of Jesus as the new Moses. Have you ever noticed this? Think for a moment about the presentation of Jesus' birth. As with the baby Moses whose life was threatened by pharaoh, so Jesus' birth took place under threat of slaughter by a paranoid monarch – Herod. Moreover, both babies are providentially rescued, and both return to their homeland (Israel) after time in Egypt. Matthew makes this link between the stories more obvious by quoting from the prophet Hosea, 'Out of Egypt have I called my son' (Matthew 2.15). In this striking parallel of geography and prophesy, Matthew is alerting readers that, as God once worked through Moses to liberate his people, so now this same God is fulfilling the work of liberation through Jesus, the new Moses.

And, that's just a start – the parallels continue. For Matthew, Jesus (like Moses) is the teacher and law-giver *par excellence*. Unlike Mark or Luke, Matthew structures his gospel around five distinct discourses. In this way, scholars argue, he presents Jesus' teaching as the new Law. The Torah (the Law of Moses) consists of the first five books of our Old Testament. Seemingly paralleling this, Matthew has a discourse for each book!

If we take just one of these teaching blocks, the sermon on the Mount, the allusions continue. For example, Jesus fasted forty days and nights before presenting his teaching, just as Moses had before receiving the law. Furthermore, Matthew's portrayal of this scene recalls Mosaic imagery in detail. The opening phrase, '*he went up on the mountain*' is a verbatim quotation of Exodus 19.3. It would've made more sense to say that Jesus went up '*a*' mountain, Matthew's use of '*the*' mountain invites readers to make a connection with that famous Exodus scene on Mt Sinai. On and on it goes - Moses given ten commandments, Jesus giving ten beatitudes ....

And, constantly throughout this sermon, Jesus recalls God's word to Moses: 'You've heard that it was said... "*You shall not murder*", ... *but I say ...*' (3.21/2). 'You've heard it said, "*Do not commit adultery*", *but I say ...*' (3.27/8). He's presenting what might look like a new law, but Jesus himself insists on its continuity with the Law of Moses. '*Don't think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets*', he says at one point, '*I've come not to abolish but to fulfil*'... (3.17). Except is this really true? What about those times when Jesus does seem to undermine the law of Moses – as for example in the way he plays fast and loose with the law on sabbath-keeping, or the way he ignores

proscriptions on touching or eating with those designated by the Law as unclean?

Well, in examples Jesus gives in the sermon on the mount, we begin to get some sense of what might be going on. In the Mosaic law about murder, for example, Jesus goes beneath the literal meaning to the essence of the command. You've heard it was said, do not murder; but I say, if you're angry with a brother or insult a sister you're already breaking this law. In other words, it's about more than just action leading to physical death. It extends to other ways we 'kill' people off, with our thoughts and words, for example. Harboursing resentment, nursing a grudge, gossip and slander all undermine our capacity to fulfil this law. In other words, when Jesus adds, 'but I say to you' in this teaching, he's not dismissing the original command, he is radicalising it, getting to the 'root' or what we'd call 'spirit' of the law. He does the same thing with his teaching on lust, adultery, divorce, and revenge.

And maybe this is where the strict parallel between Jesus and Moses has its limits. Jesus doesn't just *hand on* the law, like some curator wearing kid gloves in a museum seeking open up an ancient exhibit without disturbing it. No – Jesus opens up the law, opens out the law – he assumes an authority to interpret and release its life. And the way he interprets it is always the same – through the radically compassionate lens of love and mercy. Twice in Matthew's gospel, Jesus responds to the Pharisees' accusation that he is breaking religious rules, with the prophetic quote: 'Go and learn what this means: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice"' (eg. 9.13). And, of course, there's the most famous example where he sums up the entire Law in two

commandments: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart ...', wholehearted love of God and love your neighbour as yourself.

In light of this, certain details of the ancient law do fall away – not because they're being ignored, but because they've been surpassed! Because he's taken us deeper and further. Who really needs a law about the limits of retaliation (an eye for an eye) if the goal is whole-hearted love??? Of course, discerning what still matters under his new dispensation hasn't always been easy for Christians to agree on. What would Jesus do, or say?? How does mercy apply in this situation?? Discerning this amidst life's complexities is not necessarily easy. The early church spent decades arguing about circumcision and certain dietary recommendations. These issues are largely settled. But there are other important matters we're grappling with. It's why in our day we're talking about sexuality, gender, marriage equality. Those who plead for openness and changes in these matters are not doing so because they've gone soft or are selling out to declining standards and worldly values – it's not because they're breaking the law and encouraging others to break it. It's because we're still learning what it means to walk justly and 'show mercy', to exercise whole-hearted love and so fulfil the law. This is a continuing calling for the church – we'll never get to the end of it and that's understandable.

So, Jesus as the new Moses. The former of a people, the bringer of liberation, the teacher of godly life – giving the law. This link is important for Matthew. But there's more to it than that. In this gospel, Jesus is also *more* than Moses – the very presence of God, Emmanuel – God for us and with us – *fulfilling* the law. As we bring ourselves to this presence, and allow his spirit to

be formed in us, may we too receive wisdom to live as those who are truly faithful, truly righteous. May we enter more deeply the kingdom, know its life and fruit, as the law of love is inscribed upon our hearts and worked out in our living.