

8 February 2014

Fulfilling the Law (Matthew 5. 17-20)

Sarah Bachelard

Last week, we began our series on the gospel of Matthew noticing its emphasis on the continuity between Jewish scripture and tradition, and the person and work of Jesus. For Matthew, Jesus is the Messiah of *Israel*. He brings to fulfilment the long story of God's relationship with the Hebrew people – both completing this history, *and* enabling it to be understood and participated in, in a whole new way. This week, we turn to another element of Matthew's account which encompasses both continuity and newness, the recapitulation *and* radicalisation of Israel's story. It concerns Matthew's depiction of Jesus as a second Moses and his teaching of the law.

There are various parallels between Jesus and Moses running through the gospel text. Some of the clearest are seen in the respective birth stories. Both births take place under threat of the slaughter of male infants by paranoid monarchs; both babies are saved by providential rescue; and both escape to return to their respective homelands. But, as biblical scholar David Neville suggests, it is Matthew's account of the flight of Joseph to *Egypt* with Mary and the new-born Jesus that constitutes the decisive parallel. 'Since, like Moses, Jesus then had to leave Egypt, Matthew finds in Jesus' departure from Egypt a fulfilment of the declaration in Hosea 1.1, "Out of Egypt have I called my son" (Matthew 2.15).¹ By this literary means, Matthew makes the theological point that, as God once worked through Moses to liberate his people from slavery in Egypt, so now the same God is working in the same way through Jesus.

¹ David Neville, 'Things New and Old: Preaching from Matthew in Year A', *St Mark's Review*, No.216, May 2011(2), 31.

And these resonances put Matthew's account of Jesus going up the mountain to deliver the 'Sermon on the Mount' in clear parallel with the story of Moses going up Mount Sinai to receive the law. The words Jesus speaks from a mountain recall the words Moses brought down from a mountain.² In both cases, these are words that teach what to do and how to be, they are *law*, for the people of God. And though Jesus is giving part of what our Christian tradition calls the new law, the new covenant, he himself insists on the continuity with Moses: 'do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil'.

At first glance, this claim is surprising and perplexing. After all, isn't Jesus the one who said that 'the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath' (Mark 2.27), who twice in Matthew's gospel (Matthew 9.13; 12.7) talks about God preferring mercy to sacrifice and the petty-fogging legalism of the Pharisees? And yet, here he is saying, that not one 'jot or tittle' of the law will pass away until all is accomplished, and that 'unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven'. What does *fulfilment* of the law, then, really mean for Jesus and for us?

The elaborations which follow the passage we've just heard are usually thought give us the sense of it. In these, Jesus focuses on the underlying logic of the law and intensifies its demands. 'You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "Whoever murders shall be liable to judgement". But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will liable to the council ...' and so on.

As we read this particular injunction, it's worth noting that the word 'anger' has the sense of '*being angry*', or '*bearing anger*', or '*carrying a grudge*'. It is not about never getting angry or feeling anger, but it's about the kind of anger that we carry with

² Neville, 'Things New and Old', 31.

us, or 'nurse' – resentment might be a better word. Jesus is saying that resentment, bitterness, grudge bearing are like murder – because in such ways we 'kill another off', or (as we say) we 'write them off'. The deep logic of the old law against killing is extended not simply to the physical life, but to the social and relational life of the other. Fulfilling the law, then, amounts to *radicalising* its demands. Jesus seeks to get at the 'root' of ways of being that lead to murder, whereas the old prohibitions dealt more with managing the symptoms. And so on, with his teaching on lust, adultery and divorce, oath taking and limits on justified retaliation.

Well, all this is pretty familiar territory, but let me bring out what I think are a couple of neglected implications of this understanding of what Jesus means when he talks about 'fulfilling the law'. The first is that Jesus himself, on Matthew's account, is an interpreter of Scripture. He does not simply read the whole Scripture on a flat plane, every word to be taken as seriously as every other, but he has a particular interpretive lens drawn from the prophets of Israel. As we've already seen, he responds to the Pharisees' criticism of his breaking various religious rules, with Hosea's words: 'Go and learn what this means: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice"' (Matthew 9.13). And in Matthew's gospel, and *only* there, Jesus teaches that the entire Law-plus-Prophets depends on two commandments in the Torah: wholehearted love of God and love of neighbour as oneself. Neville remarks that Matthew 'consistently presents Jesus interpreting Jewish scripture and tradition in accordance with [particular] theological and moral norms: love of God and others, mercy, justice and faithfulness'.³

But this means there are aspects of the law of ancient Israel that apparently do just fall away. There *are* 'jots and tittles' of the law whose fulfilment (perhaps we could say) is realised not in their being radicalised but in being surpassed, coming to the end of their use-by date. Here we might think of some of the purity codes, rules about foods

³ Neville, 'Things New and Old', 34.

and diseases and dress, that do not count as significant moral questions inside the interpretive framework that Jesus lives from. Yet drawing this line, discerning what should still count or not as 'law' under the new dispensation has not been easy for the church to agree upon – ever. The early church spent several decades on the question of whether the rules about circumcision and certain dietary restrictions still applied or not. And as we know all too painfully, in our own day we face just the same kind of question about sexuality, divorce, homosexuality, and gender equality in the church. I don't say these questions are always easy for the church to resolve; I do say that reading Matthew's gospel should make it impossible to appeal to Scriptural 'law' as just a plain fact in the argument. Jesus himself interpreted and weighted the law he received, and his mercy and solidarity constitutes our interpretive norm.

The second implication of Jesus' teaching about fulfilling the law is to do with the notion of 'righteousness'. What kind of righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, and how is it related to law-keeping? With the old law, though it is difficult, it is not impossible that you might succeed in keeping it. You might get through your whole life having successfully refrained from murdering anyone, or giving false witness, or committing adultery or taking more vengeance than 'an eye for an eye', or (for that matter) having your ox gore someone without paying the appropriate ransom (Ex. 21.30). Of course, not everyone succeeds at this, but for those who do succeed it gives a reassuring confidence in their own righteousness, not to mention a nice basis for judging (if only ever so slightly patronisingly) those who have failed to live up to the mark.

Well, the idea that you could ever succeed at keeping Jesus' radicalised and intensified law is clearly delusional. Who is going to get through life never nursing resentment or a grudge, never lusting after anyone, never hating an enemy or someone who has persecuted you? Now, there are two ways of responding to this impossibility.

My own experience for many years was, I think, a common one. You acknowledge the impossibility and then just try harder. Failing that, there's always guilt. A lustful thought – put out my eye; feeling pissed off – whip, whip ... ; inability to forgive – I'm such a bad person ...

But could it be that there's something else being invited here? Could it be that, as well as radicalising the requirements of the law, Jesus is coaxing us towards a radicalised concept of righteousness? Instead of righteousness being something we possess, something we achieve by fulfilling the law, keeping the rules, getting life right, could it be that the righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees is simply what we find growing in us as we become dispossessed of the illusion of a righteousness of our own, as we become more and more dependent upon God for our lives?

This does not mean there is no place for moral effort and for refusing to indulge what we know is destructive of ourselves and others. But this necessary self-control is not the same as the new possibility of righteousness Jesus is talking about. Self-control is like the discipline we must exercise to learn any practice well – like playing a musical instrument, learning to write, learning to meditate. It is a school, a scaffolding, and can feel initially unnatural and restricting. But its ultimate aim is to transcend itself – as our playing, our writing, our meditating becomes part of us, fully liberated, fully expressive. The righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees is a way of being which is no longer restrictive and full of effort and self-consciously 'good', but issues simply in loving our neighbours, and even our enemies as ourselves – not as virtue, but as the deepest expression of who we really are. To fulfil the law ultimately means to transcend the law – not abandoning it for lawlessness, but becoming partakers of the righteousness of God. We achieve it finally, not by trying harder, but by being transformed. Which perhaps is what Jesus means when he concludes this part of his sermon: 'be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5.48).