

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

In The Name Of The Law

Open up, in the name of the Law - the words of Large Sarge as the police close in. *The Law* isn't a phrase that inspires a surge of positive emotion. We don't like people who are "legalistic"; if they're "law-abiding" we're happy, but not ecstatic: indeed, it sounds almost boring, dead predictable. If you lived in Basra, I guess things would be different, and "law-abiding" might be a relief. But there's something much more than that buried in the Jewish word *Torah*: and that's why it really won't do to translate it simply as *the Law*.

The First Five Books

In practical terms *Torah* means the first books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. It's true that the end of Exodus and the whole of Leviticus are taken up with actual rules; and because Levites are priests, Leviticus is much concerned with Jewish ritual laws, which as Christians we no longer observe. Deuteronomy is also full of law; but around and above all of this legal stuff, the *Torah* contains all the mighty stories of Jewish life - and the institution of the great feasts, like Passover and Tabernacles. The stories of the Creation, the Garden of Eden, the Flood, the slavery in Egypt, and Moses' fight with Pharaoh, the Crossing of the Sea of Reeds, the gift of the Ten Commandments, and the arrival at the River Jordan are all *Torah*, and the duty of a Jew is to absorb all these stories and pass them on to the next generation. It's because God reveals himself above all by his deeds, as a living God (not an idol set up by human wishful thinking) that we need the stories, need to make them our own.

Living By The Law

"Law-abiding" now looks a little more inviting. The Passover shows us Jews inheriting the story of liberation as their own story, as they eat the lamb standing up, in their travelling clothes, ready to leave their slavery and join in the free pilgrimage to the Promised Land. You "abide" by this Law when you don't cling to the safety of a slave, and choose the path of freedom that leads to the fulfilment of God's promises. That's not boring, but exciting. And because we do it, and it changes us, it becomes a story that we are writing with our lives. That's creative! This is the *Torah* that inspires the Psalmist,

who says: *It is your promise in distress that gives me comfort. Had your torah not been my delight, I would have perished in my misery. How I love your torah! I ponder it all day long. The torah you have uttered is more precious to me than all the wealth of the world.*

Fulfilling The Law

Once we have got it into our heads that the Law means our whole knowledge of God, of his life and of his deeds towards us, the idea of *fulfilling* the law takes on brilliant colours and generosity. When we love another human being, we are governed by that love, it becomes a law for us. Our fulfilment of the law of love lies in our attentiveness, our readiness to serve the one we love, to put our life at the disposal of theirs, to make over anything we can to make them happy. This is how God is towards us: and everything that flows towards us in love, is a gift from God. Our joy lies in receiving his gifts with attention, responding with gratitude, and living the life that is enriched and graced because it is loved. This is surely what Jesus wants to tell his relatives and neighbours in the synagogue of his home town. He stands among them, charged with the divine love that sent him into the world, and he reads to them a lyrical expression of the love of God that inspires a prophet: there is good news, the poor can rejoice, the captives can be freed, there is new light for the blind, the failed and rejected can stand and look up: the favour of God is to come to them this year. All of this is a truth which permeates the messenger, *because the Lord has anointed him*. Now, *the anointed one* in Hebrew is "Messiah": in Greek, "the Christ". Then Jesus simply says: *These words are coming true, even now, as you listen to me*. Truly a claim that he himself is fulfilling the *Torah*, making good the promises of God.

A Time Of Blessings

That shiver that ran down the spines of those who heard Jesus must be our response too. It truly is a time for blessing for us, a year of the Lord's favour: in word and sacrament we can lay hold of his gifts, and in our lives we can respond gladly to his invitation. It is promised that because he has ascended to the Father, Jesus will fill us with gifts. Let's find them and keep them!

Fr Philip