

Do you ever worry about something you've read in the Bible? Probably not. You have to read it before you can worry about it. Do you ever read the Bible? I'm sure you do. It's that really thick book with the wafer thin pages propping up the wobbly bed leg. So, if you read it- which I'm sure you do-do you ever worry about what you've read? There is, it has to be said, lots in the Bible to worry about.

At the very least you might worry about how to pronounce those Hebrew names, especially if you're one of those golden few who have volunteered to read in church... Melchizidecky, Abinabad, Shadrach Meshach and wassiface. Keep reading though, and mispronunciation will be the least of your worries.

Here's a little list of some of the things from the Gospels that might have you shifting uncomfortably and fretting your fingernails. There's the horror story of Lazarus the dog-licked beggar and the rich man in eternal torment. There's all those Woes in today's gospel. There's the chap with the wrong clothes unceremoniously ejected from the wedding banquet. There's the bridesmaids locked out of the banquet because they went shopping. There's the sin against the Holy Spirit which can never be forgiven... which is worryingly unspecified. There's Satan tempting and demons tormenting, there's anger and wrath and oodles of smiting. There's millstones and mountains and judgement and hellfire and outer darkness and wailing and gnashing of teeth. These are a few of the worrying things...

And that's before we've even started on St Paul. Women where are your hats? Men and women: why are you married? Didn't you read the bit where Paul says it's better not to marry? Neither it seems did the Bishops. How much wine is the little wine that's good for the stomach? When Paul finishes his list of works of the flesh which keep you from inheriting the kingdom, how exactly is he defining jealousy, anger, and quarrels, drunkenness and carousing and what precisely are the 'things like these' that end the list? I'd worry if I were you.

And if you get to the end of the good book, it doesn't exactly finish with a jolly sing-a-long song and dance number does it?

There is a lot in the Bible to worry about. And rightly so. There's an amazing amount of comfort to be found in the pages of scripture, but it's sometimes helpful for us to worry whether we're doing the right thing by God and by our neighbour.

What you *shouldn't* worry about is all that stuff in the Old Testament- in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy- those 613 commandments, statutes and

ordinances that find themselves lumped together under the term 'the Law'. You shouldn't worry about that. It doesn't apply to you.

Let me give you some examples from the Law, so you know what I'm talking about. The Law states that you are allowed to possess slaves- both male and female as long as they're bought from next door nations- Wales for example. Exodus also allows you to sell *your* daughter into slavery. Men you are not allowed to touch a menstruating woman *or* anything that she's touched. There are a whole host of animals and birds that you must kill and burn because God likes the smell (and overdoing the barbecue don't count). Having lost your sense of smell is not a bar to the priesthood (in fact with all that sacrificial charring going on it undoubtedly helps); but nobody with defective eyesight- such as needing glasses- can approach the altar. Anyone working on the sabbath must be put to death. Men again: you are forbidden to get your hair trimmed around the temples or trim your beard. Everybody: touching the skin of a dead pig is forbidden, so no playing netball. Or rugby. No poly cotton clothing. And if a child gives you cheek, they must be put to death.

Notice that I haven't even started on the things you are forbidden to eat. Like scampi. And bacon butties. And oyster sauce.

Do we do any of this? No. Should we do any of this? No. And let's not be having any of this 'well the moral laws still apply to Christians but the religious ones don't' because these are *all* religious laws. If we are saying 'some of this applies, but not other bits' then we are making our own laws, not God's. Torah is all or nothing.

So, nothing it is then

If you've read your Bible - or sat in church often enough to hear the complete three year cycle of Gospel readings- you might be wanting to shout out: hold on a moment Rev Mr. Erm, what was it that Jesus bloke said?

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. I For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished"

I know it sounds like I'm saying the exact opposite of what the boss man said and so we should be worried about the law shouldn't we? After all we're regularly breaking most of it.

So. Time to buy a new hat, grow our beards and gather stones? I think not.

There are two ways we can interpret what Jesus said there.

- 1) All the demands of the law are still in place for everybody.
- 2) What Jesus accomplished has fulfilled the law and it is not something that should worry us.

If you look at two thousand years of Christian practice, look at what we've done, the proof of our pudding, and it's pretty clear that the answer is 2). The Law is not for us.

If the Bible is to be believed this is not something that St Paul decided to do but Jesus didn't. You'll sometimes hear that said. What Paul pushed to its logical conclusions Jesus started. Beginning with the dietary regulations ('Thus he declared all foods clean') and the Sabbath laws. ('Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath, to heal or to harm?')

So, then, what is Jesus saying.? What should we understand when we hear him say:

'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil'

Jesus hasn't come to get rid of the law: he's come to do something much more radical, much more revolutionary than that: he's come to fulfil it.

'I've not come to let you off the hook. Instead I've come with an enormous net. From now on what's right is going to be so much bigger. ' That's the point of what follows where his disciples are told to be better than the scribes and pharisees; when we are told to not just love our neighbours but to love our enemies; not just to eschew adultery and murder but lust and hate too. It's no longer going to be the case that all you need is to tick 613 boxes. It's going to be a bigger net, cast much wider.

Which might make you stop worrying and start panicking. It was bad enough before, now it's ten times worse. It might make you start panicking had not Jesus given us one rule to ring them all, the Golden Rule.

Do to others, as you would have them do to you.

That's it. Jesus's Golden Rule.

It's a rule that is over-arching but not over-specific. It's a rule that can take account of changing circumstances, changing cultures, changing knowledge, changing understanding; a rule that can change with the times but still remain unchanged, unchanging and true to itself.

Which means that we can abolish slavery, stop stoning people, properly protect children, consecrate short sighted bishops, get hair cuts and enjoy Cantonese cuisine. It also means we can decide that marriage of two people of the same sex is a good thing, or that civil partnerships are marriage by any other name or that women are at least equally important as men and should have precisely the same rights and opportunities.

Do to others, as you would have them do to you.

Sounds easy- things that are easy to understand always do- but the practice might be a bit more challenging. OK, a lot more challenging. It's easier to see someone else suffering than to suffer ourselves, it's easier to grab the good things for ourselves rather than share them. The Golden Rule is not something that kicks in to help if you have a difficult moral dilemma to solve: it's designed to rule every moment of every day. If it were followed, it would be revolutionary indeed: there would be no rich people for Jesus to condemn for starters, and no religious hypocrites tying up burdens for others to bear either. All God's children; no favourites.

Gold never rusts, corrodes or changes. It can be beaten melted and moulded into many different shapes and always remains the same gold.

Do to others, as you would have them do to you.

The Golden Rule. The Law not abolished, but fulfilled.