**Sermon of the President of the Methodist Church in Ireland**

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**At the Michaelmas Law Term Service**

**St Michan’s Church (Church of Ireland), Dublin 7**

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Readings Deuteronomy 26: 16 -19 and Romans 8:1-5

The setting of our Old Testament Reading from Deuteronomy is that God has redeemed His people from slavery in Egypt. By a series of wonderful events He has rescued them from captivity and set them free. In response, He invites them to commit to Him and they readily respond. So, we come to verse 17 of Deuteronomy 26 where we read ‘you have declared this day that the Lord is your God and that you will walk in obedience to Him, that you will keep His decrees, commands and laws – that you will listen to Him’.

Now doesn’t that all sound lovely. What a beautiful picture of a people who have been set free by God and have now committed to ‘to keep His decrees, commands and laws…’. There would be no need for lawyers in a society like that!

However, you don’t need me to tell you that the world is not like that! And indeed, as can easily be seen through the history of the Bible, God’s people were completely unable to keep their promise. Rather than keep God’s law it sometimes seemed that all the law did was illustrate what a failure they were in trying to keep it.

Of course, law is crucial for the proper functioning of any society and for the protection of the rights of everyone especially the weakest in society. Let us thank God that we live in a country where there is proper law and where anyone can have a hearing, where anyone can have the opportunity to defend themselves. Let us thank God that we live in a country where no one can be told you have no right to speak in your defence. We all know that in some places around the world that is not the case and large numbers of people are voiceless with little or no chance to defend themselves. But thank God for the law in Ireland and I thank God for Lawyers, for people committed to giving a voice to those who might otherwise be voiceless. So, I salute you and I thank God for your work and I pray that God would guide, strengthen and enable you as you seek to speak on behalf of those for whom you advocate.

So, as I have said, let us give thanks for law as we remind ourselves that it is crucial for the proper functioning of a society and for the defence of people’s rights.

 However, when it comes to our relationship with God we need to think beyond law. That was the issue that followed from our Old Testament reading. The people, having been redeemed by God, committed themselves to keep the law – but they could not. The law was God’s standard but people could not reach it. So, with that in mind let us turn to our New Testament reading. In Romans 8:3 we read of “what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh…”

That is the key issue when it comes to our walk with God. We cannot keep His standard. We cannot make ourselves worthy of salvation. We can never be good enough to be in personal relationship with a holy and perfect God.

So is that it then? Is there no hope?

Let’s read the rest of verse 3 “for what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering and so He condemned sin in the flesh”.

God knew that we could not keep the standard. God knew that us trying harder would never make us good enough. The law was powerless in regard to our salvation. But what the law was powerless to do God did by sending His own Son. God came and lived amongst us in Jesus Christ. God lived a life that was perfect and that was beyond condemnation. Jesus completely fulfilled the law but then on the cross He took upon Himself the condemnation of a law breaker. He went through separation from a holy God. He went through judgement if you like so that we need not do so.

As a result the way for us to come to God personally was made open. No longer do we have to keep an impossible set of rules and laws. No longer do we have to meet a standard that we cannot meet. Now the way to salvation is simply to throw ourselves upon the grace of God.

What is grace? Let’s unpack those 5 letters. GRACE = God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense

Grace can do what law cannot. Grace can transform people by setting them free while changing them from the inside. Law is absolutely necessary for the regulation of human society but only grace can change us on the inside and it is only by grace that we can meet personally with God.

You may well be familiar with the musical Les Miserable and the film version produced a few years ago. It’s always been my favourite musical not just because I love the music but because I love the story. The main character, Jean Valjean had been subject to the law for 19 years – it was actually a corruption of proper law as he was sentenced to 19 years of hard labour just for stealing a loaf of bread. However what that did was make him into a very hard man. Eventually he was released but had nowhere to stay and couldn’t get work or be accepted in any community until finally a kindly Bishop had mercy on him and took him in, fed him and gave him a bed to sleep. But during the night he rose from his bed and stole a piece of the bishop’s silverware. Next morning 3 policemen knocked at the Bishop’s door with Jean Valjean in tow ready to put him in chains for life at the bishop’s word. But the Bishop exclaimed how glad he was to see Jean Valjean and asked had he forgotten that he had given him 2 silver candlesticks as well. This wonderful act of undeserved grace threw Valjean into a complete turmoil which finally broke down this hard man and transformed him. This encounter with grace turned his life around completely.

An interesting subplot to the story is the struggles of the police inspector Javert who could never get beyond the law. He pursued Jean Valjean till the end of his days but could never imagine that Valjean had indeed been changed. Until at the very end a strange confluence of events proves to Javert that Valjean has indeed been transformed but he just cannot cope with this knowledge, he cannot conceive that there is anything better than law.

But the truth is that it is only grace that can really transform and it is only grace that can open up a personal relationship with God for each and every one of us.

So, as a I conclude, I would urge you to do good law, but don’t apply it to your salvation and your relationship with God. That can only happen through God’s grace.

God’s law is so perfect and so absolute that no one can every achieve righteousness, but God’s grace is so great that we do not have to. We are simply invited to come to Him as we are and allow His grace to set us free and to change us from the inside out.