Sermon 18 October 2026 The Law of Love

1 John 3:11-17 Matthew 23:1-12

Some years ago, William Golding wrote a popular novel called, 'Lord of the Flies', which was made into a very successful movie. It's about a group of 14-year-old boys who became marooned on a deserted island when a plane evacuating them from England during World War 2 crash-lands in the Pacific Ocean. The pilot and co-pilot are killed outright but the boys survive unharmed.

At first, everything goes well for the boys. They enjoy the adventure of exploring the island and of being on their own. But then everything turns sour. Bickering breaks out among them, and they split into two rival groups. Gradually, they turn savage and fighting takes place between the two groups, leading to even killing. It is a harrowing but very revealing story.

One of the points that emerges from Golding's story is that, left to itself, human nature turns violent. In other words, without laws and structures to guide it, human nature tends towards evil. It becomes the world of the animal – the survival of the fittest.

It reminds me of a TV series in the 1970's entitled, 'The Survivors.' It was a post-apocalyptic drama about what happens when most of the world's population is wiped out by a virus. The survivors join up with one another in small groups but with no law, no courts, no government of any description, it becomes a very brutal experience. No one can be held to account and it is very much a matter of the survival of the strong. It was gripping viewing.

Back to Golding's story. The positive message to take from it is that society needs laws and structures if it is to survive. Without laws and structures, society soon degenerates into a kind of jungle. Nothing is respected. Nothing is sacred.

Ancient Jews has a similar philosophy about human nature. They believed that laws and structures were necessary if Israel was to survive and grow as a nation. There's a scene from the Book of Nehemiah in which the nation gathers and dedicates itself to the keeping of the law. *'Ezra the priest brought the scroll of the law before the assembly, which included the men and women and all the children old enough to understand. The Levites read from the Book of the Law of God and clearly explained the meaning of what was being read.'* Nehemiah 8:2,8.

From that day on, the study of the law of Israel became one of the most important professions. These ancient lawyers, called scribes, took upon themselves the task of applying the major laws of the land to the tiniest details of everyday life. For example, take the law that said a person should not work on the Sabbath. The scribes spent hours discussing how that law applied to such things as walking. How far could a person walk before walking ceased to be a recreation and become work? So there were laws stating that it was alright to walk half a mile on the Sabbath but anyone who walked beyond that distance broke the law.

But the scribes went further. Just to make sure that no one accidentally broke the law by walking a little more than half a mile, they made it a law that they could only walk two-fifths of a mile!

The upshot of this is that by the time this scribal interpretation of the law was finished, it took more than fifty volumes to hold the mass of regulations that resulted. Who on earth is going to plough their way through all that?! Certainly not the many common people in Israel. They gave up trying to keep all the laws placed upon them by the scribes. They were totally discouraged and gave up trying to please God. As a result, these unfortunate people were rejected by the scribes and Pharisees as sinners and outcasts. And this is where Jesus comes in.

This explains why Jesus dealt so harshly with the scribes and Pharisees. It was because they had turned religion into a set of rules. I quote from our gospel reading: '*Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "The teachers of religious law and the Pharisees are the official interpreters of the Scriptures. They crush you with impossible religious demands and never lift a finger to help ease the burden. Everything they do is for show."'* Matthew 23:1-4. Jesus railed against this preoccupation with rules and regulations.

So, how does this relate to you and me today? I think there is a message there for both our church today and also you and me. We must be careful that the focus on ritual and rules doesn't detract from expressing love for God through worship that comes from the heart, not the mind, and also, and this is

so very important, expressing love for God through our love for one another. Jesus reduced all the commandments of the law to these two: *'Jesus said, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And a second is equally important: Love your neighbour as yourself. The entire law is based on these two commandments."'* Matthew 22:37-40. Once again, Jesus makes it simple and relevant. All too often, we tend to make it a little complicated. In times of need, people often turn to religion. It is so very important that we are placed in such a way that we are able to meet that need in a way that provides a degree of comfort and hope. I believe this is really what Jesus is telling us.

I refer to our first reading, *'If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?'* 1 John 3:17.

I want to finish by making a point that is very much aligned with this. In a couple of weeks, we celebrate in our Anglican calendar All Saints Day. I begin by asking this question – What makes a saint? Can we be saints? The answer to that is definitely yes. We don't have to be a Mother Teresa or a Fransis of Assisi, but very simply God expects us to bring peace and happiness as we go about our daily lives. Jesus said, *'Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God.'* Matthew 5:9. (Sermon on the Mount). That's what being a saint is all about. Let me give you a very simple example.

There was this elderly couple who lived on a large corner lot near a school. The children from the school had the habit of cutting across the corner of their lawn, wearing an ugly path through it. At first, this merely annoyed the couple, but after a while, it angered them. The couple realised that something had to be done. The situation was poisoning their attitude towards the children and destroying their peace of mind.

The couple hit upon a solution. First, they put crushed gravel on the path. Then they lined it with flowers and then they sat on a bench beside the path. When the children came out of school, the couple sat on the bench and greeted them as they passed by. The response from the children was amazing. They stopped and thanked the couple and even took time to chat with them. The relationship between the elderly couple and the children blossomed. In short, the couple turned an unhappy situation into a happy one. Simply, they spread a little love and what a difference it made.

Everything, absolutely everything gets back to people and how we treat people. The success of any organisation, whether they be of a business nature or a charitable nature, which includes churches, of course, will depend on the nature and quality of the relationships within that organisation. In other words, people.

A couple of quotes to underpin our message this morning. Harold Kushner, American rabbi and author, said, *'When you are kind to others, it not only changes you, it changes the world.'* How many times have we said, never underestimate the power of a kind gesture.

The final word goes to Archbishop Desmond Tutu: *'Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.'* My friends, to put it very simply, that's what it means to be a saint, and it's something we can all do.