

Law and Life

Did you see the play “Cats?” You may remember the big old cat called Deuteronomy. Pets get called all sorts of names and this wise old cat might help us to remember the book from which our first reading comes today – the Book of Deuteronomy. It’s a book of law, the law of the ancient people who captured and eventually settled in Israel. It took many generations and different authors before we had the book we read today.

In the Book of Deuteronomy we have a code of law which has as its basic principle “The Lord our God is the one Lord.”

This is the starting point of the text quoted by Jesus when he was asked what was the greatest commandment. In his reply he quoted these lines from the Book of Deuteronomy: “Listen, Israel: the Lord our God is the one Lord. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5) Of this text he said “This is the greatest and the first commandment.” Then, quoting from another book of the Jewish law (Leviticus 19:18) he said “The second resembles it: You must love your neighbour as yourself.” (Matthew 22:34-40)

The Book of Deuteronomy presents the commandments as a gift from God to provide direction for our lives.

I like the story of the ship’s commander who saw a light ahead and sent a message to an oncoming ship to alter its course. The reply was that the commander had better alter *his* course. Angry that he was challenged, the commander sent the same message again. But once more the response was that he should change *his* course. Finally he said, “I am a destroyer. If you don’t alter course, I shall destroy you.” He was humiliated when the reply came back, “I am a lighthouse. If you don’t alter your course, you will destroy yourself.”

That is like us when we put ourselves above the law written on our hearts. Saint Matthew puts it very simply and clearly for us in the gospel with his example of building a house on solid ground. The passage we read today is the end of the Sermon on the Mount, the blueprint that Jesus gave to those who follow him. It is a rule of life that speaks to us of a reward for the poor in spirit, the gentle, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for justice, those persecuted for Christ’s sake.

Whether we are politician, poet, prophet, priest or housewife, unless our lives are centred on God and the Word of God, then we have built on a weak foundation. By contrast, when we take our lead from the teaching of Christ, we are building on rock.