PENTECOST 16

The collect for today, "Almighty God, you have taught us that love is the fulfilling of the law. Grant that we may love you with our whole heart and our neighbours as ourselves; through Jesus Christ our Lord". Amen.

Love is the fulfilling of the Law. A recent case which attracted a great deal of publicity was concerned with a Doctor who considered that the most loving thing to do for an elderly lady who was extremely ill, was to administer a lethal dose of a pain killing drug. He was found guilty of causing her death and was given a suspended sentence. What effect this will have on his general practice remains to be seen. You might think that his sentence was not severe enough for the crime which he had committed - but this is a very common ethical dilemma. Who are we to make judgements? The Doctor was after all, motivated by love for his patient - but what he did was against the law. In this case love certainly did not fulfil the law.

Another case, which has attracted a lot of publicity, concerns the separation of the Siamese twins. Is it right to take the life of one child in order to save another?

Politicians are often faced with similar moral dilemmas. A few years ago President Bush consulted Billy Graham before he committed thousands of troops to the Gulf War - an action which led to many thousands of deaths of Iraqi soldiers - many of whose bodies remain buried under the desert sands - as well as many American troops. According to the Christian teaching a Just War is one in which the good which is likely to be achieved by going to war, outweighs the evils involved in waging the war, and in which a clear distinction can be made between combatants - whose lives are at stake - and civilians. But in a modern war, calculation of future escalation is never reliable and no real distinction between military personnel and civilians can be made. Therefore no modern war can be justified in Christian terms.

According to the commandments of Moses, the taking of any human life is wrong. Hence abortion is wrong - but what if the mother's life is in danger - or what if the embryo shows signs of becoming a severely disabled human being?

These questions are not abstract speculations; they are the very stuff of everyday life. What is the Christian way of dealing with them?

First of all it must be said that the Bible is not, and was never intended to be, a TextBook on Ethics and Morals. You just cannot find a suitable text to deal with modern medical ethics or the problems of war and peace. You can't find a suitable text in the New Testament for the problem of remarriage after divorce.

So how do Christians make moral decisions? Teachers are told by politicians that they must teach children the difference between right and wrong. Where do we start?

I suppose that our basic attitude to matters of right and wrong come from our Judeo-Christian traditions. Certainly,

throughout the Old Testament there is a strong awareness of, or a sense of, being the chosen people of God - a people with a special responsibility to care for the poor and the stranger - hence the commandment in the book of Leviticus (19:18) to love thy neighbour as thyself - a command which was repeated by Jesus in the Gospels of the New Testament.

Furthermore, what is good for people is not invented by philosophers but is given by God. The prophet Micah said "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly before God".

So these attitudes - the basic law of love and the value of justice and mercy, come down to us from generations of people who have valued them - regarded them as God - given. Hence the Christian Church - the new Israel as it is sometimes called, is the community of faith which has kept alive these values and attitudes. They are enshrined in our legal system. So all our moral laws are worked out from these principles.

These traditions, which we describe as "The Law and the Prophets", finds fulfilment in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus was a man of the people who shocked the Pharisees of his day by his refusal to place religious rules above the needs of people. "The Sabbath was made for man - not man for the Sabbath. He annoyed the religious leaders by extolling the virtues of the Samaritan - the one who showed mercy to the wounded man. In his life, death and resurrection, Jesus was the Icon of God himself - showing the power of self-giving love at its highest point. He showed what it was to be fully human. So if want our character to rise above that of "well fed pigs wallowing in a trough" we cannot merely be content with pleasure and an attitude of "I'm alright Jack". If we wish to be called the followers of Jesus' then our ethics and morals must be recognisable as Christian. This does not imply a narrow minded Puritanism - on the contrary it implies that we live our lives abundantly - motivated by self-giving love.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, shortly before he was executed by the Gestapo at the end of the last world war, "Man is summoned to share in God's sufferings at the hands of a Godless world. He must therefore really live in the godless world, without attempting to gloss over or explain its ungodliness in some religious way or other. To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to make something of oneself (a sinner, a penitent, or saint), to be a Christian is to be fully human".

This does not give easy answers to the world's moral maze, neither does it give any right to judge the moral decisions of others. What it does give us is a way to follow - a way which we to not travel alone and unaided, but a way which leads to life eternal.

AMEN