

Recite them to your children

Deut 6. 1 – 9  
Matt 18. 1 – 5

Beverley Minster Legal Service 2015

Moses said to the people: Keep these words...recite them to your children...talk about them at home.

It struck me a while ago that I had got into my sixth decade without seeing a court of law in session. Indeed the nearest I'd got to the formal workings of the law was accompanying Julia, to whom I'm married, as she qualified as a solicitor and we did the thing at the Law Society. While it may give you some comfort that the Vicar of the Minster has therefore never been the subject of criminal proceedings, it was disturbing to me that I was so practically ignorant of the daily reality of such a vital part of the health of our society.

So I took myself to the Magistrates Court round the corner, to watch, as an ordinary citizen, the public outworking of the legal process. What to expect? I think I had some image in my mind of *Crown Court*, that wonderful 1970s series, with a packed public gallery thrilling to the cut and thrust of legal theatre. This was not the reality I encountered. While I was warmly welcomed, it was with some bafflement, and I quickly became 'the person who seems to want to observe, even though he's not a relative'. I understood the bafflement when I found that the public gallery was a chair just far enough away from the action not to mix me up in it. But it was an instructive morning, even if I did stick out a bit.

In the Hebrew Scriptures the commandments, statutes and ordinances which are at the root of our civil and criminal justice system is accompanied by both a code of practice and an encouragement to continuing professional development. The laws come with a requirement not to keep them rolled up in a scroll. Rather they should be lived, celebrated, savoured, cherished, passed on. 'Keep these words', says Moses. 'Recite them'. Talk about them in and out of the house. Like the post it notes the forgetful leave all over the house to ensure that car keys, tickets and glasses are where they should be, stick these laws everywhere. The fact that I was met with surprise in my local court when I wanted to find out more suggests that not everyone is so desperate to get the law 'inside them', as one modern translation puts it. Most people are keen to be outside, not inside, I guess.

Above all, Moses says, it's your children you have to think about. Repeatedly in the early Hebrew Scriptures, as the new nation is shaped, the order is given to "tell your children", to shape them, to form their identity, to get them to know that the developing of their conscience and morality and ethics and righteousness will be vital for them and their community. The commandments, positive and negative, are there to describe a society, a common wealth, where consideration is given to the neighbour, to the stateless, to the refugee and to the poor; and where political power, civil authority, military force and financial riches are bounded and controlled to enable the flourishing of all. Get that inside your heads, says Deuteronomy. Get that inside your children.

So what do we tell our children? What do we 'recite' to them? This, of course, goes way beyond the criminal justice system, but we are reminded today by our High Sheriff about the reality of child sexual exploitation. What is recited to those children, by some, is that their lives only have worth as they are submitted to the hostile will of others, as their weakness is the subject of another's power. What we would recite to them is that each life

has worth in itself, and that each of us has a duty to enable others to thrive. For some of you that means daily involvement in curbing abuse, tackling offenders, taking on barriers in the system, and helping and healing those who have been told that they are only there to be used. You have our support, and our prayers, as in word and action you recite a message some of them have never heard.

What do we tell our children? That our laws, at their best, describe who we are, and how we can live side by side, how we can own without stealing and flourish without oppressing. That starts with children themselves: the command to 'play nicely' offered to toddlers seems to me to be a decent evocation of the golden rule common to all the great faiths: 'do onto others as you would have them do to you'. I did once my PCC to 'play nicely' as I went on sabbatical, and they did. Almost.

What we tell our children is about how we treat them: how they are safeguarded, what defines a good education (let me tell you there is perhaps no more terrifying a prospect than being the chair of the Teaching and Learning Committee of a school facing an OFSTED in the next eight weeks). It develops with what messages we bombard them with about success, beauty, achievement, worth. I'm not sure that *The Apprentice*, or *X Factor* have exhausted the range of possibilities there. It continues with how we shape our society and use our money, and some of that will need legislation too. Those of you who work in tax law may well be sharpening your pens and doubling the size of your hard drives as I speak. We recite good things to our children when we constantly ask ourselves what is fair.

What will we tell our children? As ever, Jesus takes the question and reframes it. What will your children tell you? What will they recite to you? That you become citizens of heaven, subject to divine legislation and polity, when you receive in the way children do. Perhaps it is those of you who exercise the greatest power, who can change the course of people's lives in an instant, who know most the need to be humble, as a child is humble. Jesus says that he will be found in those with least power and no voice. Treat them well and you have discovered the divine.

This service affords the chance to reflect on how our commandments and statutes and ordinances enable that to happen. May you know wisdom and power from God to determine, to judge, to enact. And may we all find ways of talking about this, in and out of the house, to our children and with each other, so that the attendants at Beverley Magistrates Court may be less surprised when someone wants to find out more, for no greater reason than knowing that how we legislate is how we serve, and that for Jesus sake. Amen.