

Trinity VI

“Except your righteousness shall exceed” (Gospel)

We had better take the Lord's words at face value. The scribes are those who have made a profession of understanding what the Jewish law means, and so begin the process of working it up into a coherent system. The Pharisees (whatever they may have been earlier) are a holiness club (such as John and Charles Wesley founded in their youth) who seem to think that if some of Israel (themselves) will take the law seriously and indeed go beyond what is clearly required, this may compensate for the laxity of others and encourage God to rescue his people from their oppressors. Either way, the Jewish law is God's way of life for his people. And while it is right to warn that “law” is not a perfect rendering of the Hebrew (perhaps “teaching” is a little better), nevertheless all the New Testament writers do use a Greek term which is fairly translated by “law” (or sometimes “custom”).

So the Lord is quite clear – behaviour matters. Not indeed so as to earn forgiveness; the Good News is that forgiveness is already on offer by the Father's graciousness. But the forgiven must live out this their happy condition.

The Lord's complaint elsewhere is that the scribes say and don't do, while the Pharisees indeed do the extra but lose sight of the basics. He calls his disciples to obedience to God's revealed will (the “law” or teaching) not merely as the letter has it, but radically. Many of us can say truthfully enough that we have not killed or committed adultery after the letter; but have we let our thoughts indulge the first steps?

The “kingdom of heaven” is not a place, but a permanent relationship with God, where the carrying out of his will is completely natural. That is what we are trying to enter. We fail, indeed. But God forgives.

So we pray “thy will be done” (and with the Pharisees “thy kingdom come”!) in earth as in heaven; yet we also have to pray “forgive us our trespasses”.