

Leavers' Evensong 2018 Jesus College Oxford

Judges 8:22-23, 9:8-15

Mark 12:28-34

In Nomine...

Some of you have already passed your driving test. Some of you may be - *gearing up* to it - over the summer.

I won't tell you about my driving test. Well, I should say driving *tests* to be precise. A long time ago. And the fact that the final examiner was the same as my first one and he recognised me and took pity on me had nothing to do with me passing it – even when we ended up so off the test-route we arrived at a pub.

But who, or what, drives you? Do you drive your own life or do you sometimes feel like a passenger in your own life? Who's in charge of your life, your futures?

That's like asking who makes the rules. In Oxford we don't so much have rules as "conventions" - if we're lucky in the form of ironically-named "*handbooks*" available online. Otherwise, with the exception of overwhelming piles of paperwork for Freshers, it's largely unwritten and you basically find you are guessing the "conventions" for the first seven years. Unless you have a good friend or two who can explain why others frown when you pass the port to the right.

I've broken one of my little rules tonight. Normally, the *Bible readings* define the style and shape of the service. But today, the *organ scholars* told me what music they were doing and I fitted *everything* around them. Which I don't really mind because I love Zadok the Priest too. And it is actually Biblical so I've managed to squeeze in more Old Testament.

Our musicians inspired me, as you all often inspire me. I hope you'll go on inspiring people, and being inspired, over the vacation, over your years abroad, over your future lives. Be inspirational. Let that be one of your ruling principles.

In fact, what *are* your ruling principles? Your guidelines for life? Right back in Freshers' Week I rushed over to Guernsey to preach at a special service for a whole load of lawyers. People who make the rules and help others keep them. And one of the readings for that day was the Gospel reading from Mark you've just heard.

The only rule Jesus Christ wants to give us is a great one to rule our whole lives by. Former Australian Prime Minister, our own MCR fresher Kevin Rudd talks about the inspiration he gets from this "golden rule". He told us at our Colloquium back in May how he questioned every political decision he made according to this rule.

"This is the first commandment," said Jesus, "Love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." That's actually taken from the ancient rules set out in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, in the book of Deuteronomy. The next bit is a natural follow-on, if we say that God is Love. Jesus now adds, "Love your neighbour as yourself". That too is taken from the Old Testament, this time the book of Leviticus. Jesus may have been quoting two old Hebrew sayings, but he was the first to put them both together like that. All based on God's nature as a loving God.

Jesus wants our only rule to be a three-way love. Love yourself, love each other, love God. And if God's not your cup-of-tea, you could re-phrase this with reference to "something bigger, something beyond your world, your understanding, your experience, your sphere of reference". It's about recognising that you're not the be-all-and-end-all. That there's more to life than this, something beyond...

That three-way love is my most fundamental rule of life. It's not always easy, especially when life is tough and I really do feel like life has thrown me violently into the back seat of the car. Sometimes I fail in one, two, or all three of these ways of love. But in so far as I can take the driving seat, then it's the rule that I know will best keep me on the road (or get me back on the road if necessary).

Back to the Organ Scholars – as ever. You may be wondering how the choice of music today made me end up here. Zadok the Priest, and Nathan the Prophet, anointed Solomon King. So I started thinking about kingship, rulers, and rules, and I remembered that fascinating story about trees we just heard. Gideon – or Jerubbaal – was a great bloke for the early Israelites, a strong leader who after an early unimaginable military victory then guided his people in justice and peace for forty years, as a so-called “Judge” (hence the title of the book, “Judges”). Gideon’s people thought so much of him they wanted to make him King, but he couldn’t accept that anyone other than God should be King. One of Gideon’s sons, Jotham, opposed his brother, Abimelech, because contrary to what their father had wanted, Abimelech was making himself king instead of God. So Jotham tells this story about trees. (And then makes himself scarce. Wise).

I like the tree story. Each tree says in its own way “My gifts are about giving”. The olive tree wants to keep giving its olive oil rather than be in charge of others. The fig tree wants to keep giving its fruit rather than take over from the other trees. The vine wants to keep giving wine rather than remove autonomy from others. It’s only the thorn bush which puts it the other way round: I’ll give you shade *only if* you put me in control. Otherwise I’ll give you *nothing!*

The ancient Israelites look foolish, giving one man power over their lives, rather than letting God be their king. That was the theme of our Psalm, 99: The LORD is King. The LORD is the one who makes the rules. Not someone who makes rules for other people in his own interests, a tyrant, a bully. But the LORD who is Love. The LORD who above all wants us to love him as he loves us, and love each other as ourselves.

The thorn-bush king is a sharp ruler, capable of injuring all who come close. It’s the farthest you can get from Love. So it’s really powerful when Jesus Christ on his way to the cross is mocked *by being crowned with thorns*.

Jesus challenges, and defeats, the power of the thorn-bush king. Jesus in his life and death starts the process, the journey, of humanity working with God to put Love firmly in charge once and for all. We’re not there yet: we have times when each of us is beaten-down by life, by death, by other people, by

circumstances beyond our control. We're not yet in the full kingdom where Love is the one and only ruler, the one and only king. Sometimes in the face of suffering or injustice it can be hard to believe that God is a loving God, that God is Love. But *because* God is Love, *human beings* are given choice, autonomy and agency for ourselves. We are called to work with God by living out that three-way love. Taking into account our human limits, we *can choose* to do *all in our power* to live and work for that kingdom *where Love rules*.

Rulers, and rules. What rules your life? What dominates your decision-making processes? What guidelines *would you like* to rule your life? Don't choose the thorn-bush king – rules that oppress you, self-imposed guidelines that get you down, or values that fail to give life. Take the driving-seat of your life when it's yours to take, and make your own choices for your lives ahead, each day.

And above all, let those choices – daily decisions as well as overarching life-plans – be governed by Love.