God does not hate shellfish!
Rev Dr Richard Bonifant
Year A, Ordinary 30
Leviticus 19:1-2.15-18, Matthew 22: 34-46
25 October 2026

I have a copy of a slightly unusual children's bible. It is called *The Awkward Moments (not found in your average) Children's Bible.* In it we find illustrated versions of some of the less than savoury stories that exist within our bible. Stories that almost never get read in church services. For example, it contains the story of Elisha, who having been mocked by a group of children for having a baldhead, called two bears out of the forest. And the bears, well, they eat the children.

If that is a bible story you don't know, that is partly because the lectionary, the resource we use to decide what readings we use from week to week, tends to steer us away from passages like Elisha commanding bears to eat rude children. And that is but the tip of the iceberg because the bible tells all sorts of stories of violence and abuse that many of us have little to no awareness of. The result of this subtle censorship is that it sanitises the bible by skipping over the parts that we find difficult. That's not entirely inappropriate. Could we really have someone read the story I just mentioned and respond with the words, thanks be to God?

This morning you heard a reading from the book of Leviticus. I draw this to your attention, because while it is a book that often gets talked about, the book of Leviticus is almost never used for Sunday readings. In fact the way readings are assigned means that Leviticus is used less than half a dozen times over a ten year period. Admittedly there is a lot of material in the bible to cover from week to week, but it is noteworthy that Leviticus gets less than 1% of our attention.

Part of the reason we don't read from this text more often is because the Book of Leviticus is awkward for Christians. It is the book of the law which expands the Ten Commandments given to Moses into a whopping 613 commandments. Leviticus operates on the assumption that

the world is good and holy but can become defiled. Thus the laws intend to keep the world and those who dwell in it, in a state of holiness. And it recognises that life is complicated, hence why the followers of Moses felt that the Ten Commandments could really use some clarification when it came to day to day life.

As many of you will be aware often the only time we pay any attention to the commandments in the book of Leviticus is when one or two verses relating to human sexuality are pulled out as part of the ongoing debates on those issues. Which is somewhat ridiculous given how happily we ignore the vast majority of those 613 commandments. I hope none of you have had a cheeseburger recently, for those are certainly banned by the book of Leviticus. Make sure you don't eat oysters, mussels, scallops or crayfish, they're all banned as well. I'm quietly supportive of the law prohibiting all men from trimming their beards. I expect to see a bearded renaissance in this congregation in the coming weeks. Although my apologies to anyone with tattoos, those are also out, as are any mixed fabrics you might be wearing, working on a Saturday, or planting a variety of plants in your garden. And on a side note, had previous generations been committed to the laws of Leviticus we would not have the game of rugby. This is because the first rugby balls were made from the body parts of pigs. The prohibition against pigs is still a feature of Jewish and Muslim dietary requirements to this day.

These laws that cover everything from hair styles and body art, to dietary restrictions and worship practices evolved from the experience of the Hebrew community. They are the result of people applying the Ten Commandments to a myriad of circumstances and experiences. And that is an important consideration when considering what is recorded in Leviticus, because these laws were created in a very different context to where we find ourselves today. And our understanding of that past historical context is murkier than many appreciate. What I am suggesting is that while we can speculate on why particular rules came into existence, we don't have a full picture.

For example we can speculate that shellfish were prohibited because at some point in time members of the Jewish community that did eat this kai moana may have become sick or even died. In a time before people understood algal blooms or the other environmental conditions

that can cause shellfish to become toxic and dangerous to eat, theology stepped in as a way of explaining what happened. God doesn't want you to eat poisonous things, is a rule created to preserve the lives of members of a community. God does not hate shellfish.

I am convinced that the two verses in Leviticus that are often interpreted as being about same sex relationships are born of a similar concern. For a community struggling for survival, procreation was incredibly important. These rules reflect a need for babies to ensure the future of a community. That was the need of a community in a specific time and context, and was not a rule ever meant to express God's attitude about all people in all place for all time. We are quite happy to interpret almost all of Leviticus in this way, so why should we privilege these two verses differently?

If you find yourself wondering why I am giving what could be called a revisionist understanding of the laws of Leviticus it is because we find exactly that approach in our Gospel reading today. Whereas Leviticus expanded the 10 laws of moses to 613, Jesus went in the opposite direction and contracted these laws down to two underlying principles. His summary of law was that firstly we are to love God and secondly we are to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. The Ten Commandments and the 613 laws of Leviticus were expressions on a macro scale of these two overarching principles. Jesus was a reformer and a revisionist. He did not believe that people should be pinned down by the colloquial particularities of Hebrew law, but rather that they live out the spirit of the law: to love God and to love each other.

Jesus recognised that rigid interpretation of ancient rules that addressed the needs of the community in a different place in a different time, had created new injustices among the people of his time. Following Levitical law in a rigid and dogmatic way divided the Hebrew community whereas the intention of the law was to unite them. Jesus rightly recognised that the law which intended to promote freedom in one generation had come to enslave those in subsequent generations. His response was to get back down to the basics.

Even those who knew Jesus and had experienced his reinterpretation of the rules struggled to come to grips with his teaching.

In the book of acts there is an account of what is sometimes called the Council of Jerusalem. At this meeting of church leaders it was debated by some that Gentile converts must also live by Hebrew law. Paul and others debated firmly against this, as they believed that God had already acted in these converts' lives. Essentially the argument was between those with a strict interpretation of the law and those who believed that God was acting in people's lives in profound ways despite the law. It was a debate about whether the church would include those whose framework for engaging with God was different to those already part of the established order. If legalism had won out over inclusiveness in that time, the Christian Church would have ended before it even began.

When we wrestle with some of the parts of the bible that we find difficult, we discover that through the biblical narrative many of the challenges we face have already been faced before. People bringing up biblical verses from the past and insisting on a single dogmatic interpretation is not new. And neither is the path we should take in responding to those who claim that God's love is partial, conditional, and limited to some but not others. The message of the church has long been the opposite. God's love is abundant, generous, and freely given to all. That is why we should love God, because God loves us so fully and completely, just as we are. And if God is that generous to each of us, our response should be to be that generous to each other. Amen.