

A Biblical Basis for a Rule of Life

A talk given by Colin Wilfred at the
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The 'way of the Lord' the road up to Jerusalem is, above all, to be seen in Jesus who is "the Way, the Truth and the Life" and we need to remember that the earliest name for Christians, according to the Acts of the Apostles, is the followers of the Way. Perhaps it's a pity that it dropped out of our history early on. Didn't some of those who later became anglican Franciscans belong to the 'Fellowship of the Way'?

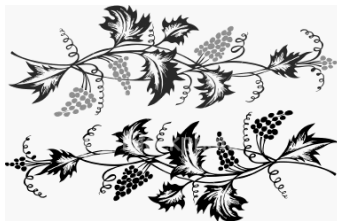
The American Benedictine, Joan Chittister, points out in a book of the Rule of St Benedict, that we tend to have a limited view of the meaning of the word 'Rule'. We think of it in terms of rules and regulations, limits and boundaries, power and authority (*cf* 'fences' in the Australian story). She points out that the Latin word *regula* (rule) can also have at least two other meanings:

- a 'railing', not to enclose but to enable you to travel a path in the right direction or to be helped up a staircase or path so you don't fall off the mountain,
- secondly, it can mean 'signpost', something that tells you where you are and how to get there.

So, when we put together the idea of a Rule of Life with the pilgrim psalms, we are reminded that it is about being willing to go on a journey – not aimless wandering but a well-trodden route, trodden by our predecessors in faith and love. A journey which does have an ending – the encounter with the living God.

As the revised Rule of the Society of St John the Evangelist (USA) puts it:

A rule of life is basically an articulation, a breaking into the open light of consciousness, of values, habits, and conceptions that would otherwise remain tacit, taken for granted. As long as these things are unconscious in the life of a group, their power and reality is obscured and muffled. Once identified, named, owned and celebrated their latent energy is released. We might put it this way: every group already has, in one sense, a rule of life – its values and ways of doing things. The challenge is to identify and to authenticate what they are.



Introduction

Please note it's 'A' not 'The'. This talk could have been based on the Beatitudes which deeply influenced the beginnings of the Taizé Community, or the 'discipleship manual' as outlined in the synoptic gospels, or the 'evangelical counsels' often used to provide biblical references for the three vows.

In fact I've chosen another way of approaching a Rule of Life for a religious community – The Psalms. Walter Brueggemann, especially in his little book 'Spirituality of the Psalms' divides the psalms into three categories and I wonder if we can use these as parallel to the role of a religious Rule, perhaps even of our own *SSF Principles*.

a) Psalms of Orientation – based on ideas of stability/ conformity/ consolidation: also, possibly, the role of a religious Rule of Life?

b) Psalms of Disorientation – a challenge to the present order in a crisis in the ordering of life: also, possibly, the role of a religious Rule of Life?

c) Psalms of New Orientation – the establishment of a new order. The establishment of a new method of governance, celebration of the new rule of the coming of God in the life of individuals and communities: also, possibly, the role of a religious Rule of Life?

Becoming more specific in the Psalms, I want to use two familiar ones- the ones we use at Midday Prayer: Psalm 119 and Psalms 120 - 133, the latter being known as the Pilgrim Psalms, Gradual or Psalms of Ascent. These have been used for many centuries to mark the Little Hours or the Prayer during the Day in monastic and religious communities.

Psalm 119

Very easy to dismiss as long, tedious, repetitious if not boring! It may be difficult to recognise that it is above all a love-song. Not a love song in the sense of the Song of Songs, full of youthful fervour, excitement and passion. Rather, this is a love which is the fruit of a long, lasting and profound relationship.

As Jonathan Graham CR put it:

"it breathes all the way through the charmed monotony of a life vowed to another: it repeats with endless variety and sweet restraint the simple inexpressible truth that can never grow weary or stale – "I love you". Every verse, except the three opening verses, use 'you' or 'your' and a large number 'I', 'me' or 'mine' and this is echoed in Jesus' prayer in John's gospel, "all that is mine is your and yours is mine".

This song is a love-song to Torah which is the Law, which it is easy for us to mistake for the legalism condemned by Jesus in the scribes and Pharisees. Torah is both God's love-song for his people and theirs for him. The law of Jesus is love for God, for neighbour and for oneself. If a Rule of Life doesn't help in that process, then it needs revising drastically!

I'm one of those people who like maps, plans and patterns, so Psalm 119 is very satisfying as it has a very clear structure and plan. There are 22 stanzas corresponding to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Each stanza has 8 verses (the eighth day is the day of the coming of the Messiah – hence fonts are often eight-sided!) and each verse begins with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The only version in English which does this is the old R.C. translation of Ronald Knox – it is ingenious but tortuous!

The use of the alphabet is not just a literary conceit, for the Jews it was a unique gift and revelation by God – designed by God, given to Moses, therefore unchangeable and sacred. It is God's alphabet, pleasing to him and complete and satisfying to us, to use each letter to celebrate one particular aspect of his love for us and our response to him. Certain key words run like threads through the tapestry: Law (25 times), Way (12), Testimony (22), Precepts (21), Decrees and Statutes (21), Judgement (23), Word (23), Promise (19), Faithfulness (5).

The law of Jesus is love and Psalm 119 reminds us how that love can be glimpsed, experienced, longed for and recognised in and through the everyday life of both of individuals and communities and in which we ultimately have promised to serve God to the end.

There is an Australian story of a city dweller visiting one of those huge farms in the outback. He says to the farmer, "How do you control and look after all these cattle? You haven't got any fences." "Ah", the farmer replied, "We don't have fences, we have wells." Psalm 119 is almost a bottomless well, celebrating both God's love and ours, however faltering and it is a true Rule of Life in the form of poetry and song.

You can see this poetic aspect very clearly in verses 1 – 3, which don't use the word 'you'.

1. Happy are they whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the Lord.
2. Happy are they who observe his decrees
and seek him with all their heart,
3. Who never do any wrong
but always walk in his ways.

Psalms 120 – 133

Twenty or more years ago, when I was asked to lead several pilgrimages to the Holy Land, I always asked the driver of the bus from the airport when we came in sight of Jerusalem, to draw off the road and then we as pilgrims would recite together Psalm 122 "Now our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem" (and very moving it was, too)!

These are the psalms sung by Hebrew pilgrims (and later by Christians) as they made their way to the Holy City of Jerusalem and to Zion and the Temple Mount. Some writers have attempted to plot the exact geography of the route the pilgrims took but that's probably going too far!

What the psalms do is fulfil some of the opening words of Psalm 119:

"walk in the way of the Lord
seek him with all their heart
always walk in his ways".

Perhaps we can see most of Psalm 119 as mirroring the steady, fixed aspects of a love relationship with God spelt out in a Rule of Life. In contrast these pilgrim psalms remind us that a religious vocation is never ultimately fixed this side of death, and perhaps not even then. It is always changing, there are always ups and downs, in our relationship with God and our brothers and sisters. Our Rule of Life may give a foundation on which to build the continuing response of God's original call to each one of us but it's not intended to be the foundation of a fortified castle - rather, the chassis of a moving caravan!