In our first reading today, from the Old Testament, God says these words to Joshua:

Be strong and courageous.  
Be careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you.  
Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go.  
This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth.  
You shall meditate on it day and night.

Joshua is the successor to Moses leading the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. Here, in this passage, Joshua is told to adhere to the law — to uphold it, to cling to it, to meditate upon it daily. He’s told that Israel’s success will be dependent precisely on such adherence to the law.

Many generations later, in the second century of the Christian era, a man called Marcion — who was probably a bishop — developed his own, unique belief system which rejected these words in the Book of Joshua, and other similar readings, out of hand. Marcion argued that the God of the Old Testament, the God of Moses and Joshua, was totally incompatible with the God of the New Testament. He believed that there were, in fact, two gods. The Old Testament God, he said, was vastly inferior to the God of Jesus Christ. This ‘Demiurge’, as he called him, was a narrow, jealous, wrathful, and judgemental God. As a result, Marcion’s canon of Scripture was a very slim volume indeed: he purged it of the Old Testament and, while he was at it, got rid of any part of the New Testament which contained positive references to the law. It’s a wonder he found anything left at all!

Later Marcion was declared a heretic by the church and excommunicated. But, like most heretics, he played a useful function. He got everybody thinking — thinking about what the canon of Scripture should look like, what beliefs it should reflect, and whether in fact the law and the Old Testament were as irrelevant and unhelpful as he thought.

Marcion’s church didn’t last the distance. But it’s interesting to note how many people, even today, still hold to a modified form of Marcionism. So you find people both inside and outside the Church who’ll say that the God of the Old Testament is a God of law and wrath, whereas the God of the New Testament is a God of grace and love. That view would lead us to dismiss God’s command to Joshua to adhere to the law with all his heart, and to dismiss the Old Testament as a whole.

But, in fact, the law in the Old Testament is itself the expression of divine grace. Indeed, the law is a gift of grace: just as creation is a gift, and just as the covenant with Noah and Abraham and Jacob is, and the promises that go with it. And that’s because God, through grace, remains faithful to his creation in the Old Testament, no matter how much human beings do that is unfaithful and destructive.

God’s creative grace holds things together when God’s people forsook the law; God’s grace gave them another chance, as it did again and again in the history of Israel.
This Old Testament perspective is confirmed by the New Testament. In our second reading, from Ephesians, the Christians in Ephesus are given clear guidelines for how they are to live:

- Do not let the sun go down on your anger …
- Thieves must give up stealing; et them work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy …
- Put away all bitterness and wrath and wrangling and slander …
- Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving …

No Moses or Joshua, no Old Testament prophet, would have the least problem in assenting to this list. It reflects what lies at the heart of the moral law.

Similarly, in our Gospel reading from St Luke, we find Jesus in the synagogue, quoting favourably from Isaiah: a vision that is integral to the Old Testament and its understanding of the ultimate aim of the law. The good news which God brings, says Isaiah, offers ‘release to the prisoners’, ‘recovery of sight to the blind’, ‘liberation for those who are oppressed’. According to Luke, Jesus re-interprets the law in a way that’s life-giving. He exemplifies the law’s concern for the poor, the disabled, the downtrodden. He embodies the law, in other words; he lives it out in his own person. And in his care for the poor and outsiders and sinners, he embodies the grace of God.

The view that the law is seen negatively in the New Testament is often ascribed to the apostle Paul, a much misunderstood figure in the early Church. Supposedly, Paul is on about grace not law. But this is unfair to Paul’s teaching. In his own words (Romans 7:12), for example, Paul says: ‘the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good’.

Now Paul is not saying that law and grace are identical or of equal value. Theologically, for him, grace comes first; it always precedes the law. So, we are justified by grace — that is to say, we are accepted by God, we are made acceptable before God, through grace; we are forgiven by grace. But, when it comes to final judgement, Paul tells us, we are judged by our good works — in other words, by adherence to the moral law in our daily lives.

But Paul goes further. He distinguishes between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law: ‘The letter kills, but the Spirit/spirit gives life’, he says in 2 Corinthians. This is an important distinction, and it has much to say about the relationship between law and grace.

With Paul’s words in mind, John Buchan — the celebrated author of ‘The 39 Steps’, who was also a politician and statesman — in one of his political speeches, says that a nation’s constitution will be ineffective if the spirit of that nation is not right.

Neither Paul nor Buchan (I assume) is trying to say that the letter of the law, the actual laws of a nation, or its constitution, are unimportant or irrelevant. But without grace and without spirit, they are not enough. If we think that laws and constitutions are all that’s needed to make things right, then we need to think again.

What is needed just as much, and perhaps even more, is what grace alone can bestow — those qualities that the law itself yearns towards but cannot actually prescribe: and they can be summed up as compassion and humility. These are the qualities which need to undergird
everything we do. They are the qualities that sum up the spirit of a nation. They are as essential for our national life as they are for our personal and professional lives.

Compassion prevents us seeing our obligations to one another in purely legalistic terms. You sometimes hear people say, ‘As long as you don’t harm anybody, you can live the way you please.’ That’s legalism; it’s not the spirit of the law, it’s the letter; and it doesn’t have much to do with grace. Compassion, love and mercy call us to do far more for the other than refrain from harming them. We are actively to do good to others; to work for their well-being; to ensure justice and equity for everyone; to protect the rights of everyone, especially the poor and the vulnerable.

Humility goes alongside love, and is impossible without it. Arrogance, which is the very opposite of humility, leads us to disdain others, to look down on them, to be filled with smug self-satisfaction at our own achievements, our prosperity, our goodness. In the Bible, arrogance is seen as a very dangerous quality: indeed, it lies somewhere at the heart of what sin is. Instead, we are to have a true estimate ourselves, the kind of humility that recognises our strengths and gifts, without exaggeration, but also knows our limitations; an attitude that enables us to be open to others, to learn from them, to recognises their gifts and strengths.

What difference would that make to our own lives if we were genuinely compassionate and humble people? What difference would it make if our national life, the spirit of our nation, were based on humility and love?

To fulfil the law, in the true sense, requires us — as God reminds Joshua — to be strong and courageous. It requires of us dedication and commitment. But it also requires us to become people of grace, as well as law; people who know our own need of forgiveness; people who are able to care profoundly for others, especially the needy. Unlike our second century heretic, Marcion, we’re not called to choose between law and grace, between judgement and mercy, or between letter and spirit. They belong together, the one flowing from the other.

Grace without the law, spirit without the letter, leads quite clearly to anarchy and chaos. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a pastor living in Nazi Germany, spoke in his theology about the dangers of ‘cheap grace’ — the kind of ‘grace’ which enabled so many in the Church in Germany to support the Nazi regime. Grace without law can lead to unspeakable horrors.

But law without grace, the letter without the spirit, leads us into a legalism that’s just as destructive in the long run: whether that’s a minimalist attitude to the law or the finding of endless loop-holes to get round its demands.

Instead, we are called today, like Joshua, to treasure God’s law, to cultivate its spirit: in love and compassion towards one another, and in humility of heart — both as individuals and as a nation. If we do that, we will become ‘imitators of God’, as Ephesians puts it: we will reflect the very nature of God himself.