

Lent 3: The Ten Commandments, the Cross and the Hope of Resurrection

Exodus 20.1-17; 1 Corinthians 1.18-25; John 2.13-22

May I speak and may you hear in the name of God, the Father Son and Holy Spirit – Amen.

It is good to be with you online on this third Sunday in Lent. It is a way in which we have got used to meeting, and thank God for it, but we will all be looking forward to the changes in Covid guidelines and regulations and to a time when we will be able to gather again physically to be together in church or wherever we can worship together.

I am going to refer to all three readings that are set for today and I would be very surprised if you have all three in the service, they are from Exodus 20: 1-17, the giving of the Ten Commandments by Moses. The people of Israel have journeyed from slavery in Egypt through the wilderness for 40 years and into the freedom of the promised land. During that period Moses comes down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments as it were to uphold our life in God and to get us through the bleak and difficult bits but also to sustain us when we come to the freedom of the promised land.

The epistle today is from the first letter of the Corinthians, chapter 1:18-25 and that is St Paul writing about the cross, 'for the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but to those who are being saved it is the power of God'. The Gospel is from John 2:13-22, it is the cleansing of the temple, Jesus throwing out the traders from the temple, reclaiming the temple as his father's house and getting into a conflict with the temple authorities and saying that this temple can be rebuilt in three days. Of course, he is talking about the temple of the body, the resurrection, Easter, this is a story pointing forward to Easter.

I am beginning to realise it is quite difficult preaching online and if you have heard this story before because I used it on Ash Wednesday when preaching from the Cathedral I apologise, but when I was the Vicar of the Isle of Dogs in East London, that loop in the river on the EastEnders opening sequence, I thought it would be a good idea to use the Ten Commandments as an introduction to the confession in Advent and Lent, the penitential seasons. The first time we did this, as people left church, the Kray Brothers' driver said to me 'I haven't heard those commandments read in church like that since I was a child, I have broken nine of them and I am not going to tell you what the tenth is'.

When I became the Vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields we kept the same practice, I thought it was helpful to hear the commandments read within the liturgy of the church, it was good for us as a community, it was as it were, that community memory to remind ourselves of the law of God. One of the congregation there said, 'Why do you think that the commandments are penitential? They are a joyful way of living in response to God'. She was right. The commandments uphold us in our life in God and what happened in Jewish teaching is that the Ten Commandments needed to be applied to every circumstance and eventuality, so inevitably they became multiplied into a holiness code and a series of commandments, rules and regulations, which I think numbers 627, and they get amplified by the Rabbis and their teaching to try to make sure that we live in keeping with the law of God.

In the Gospels, Jesus teaches that the law is still what guides us, not one jot, one tittle will pass away. Also in the teaching of Jesus what we hear is that none of us live up to it. Jesus says in Matthew's Gospel that we Christian people are like children or outsiders, all sorts of images where

it just causes us to think about who we are, that we are not perfect, that we are not good, we are not self-righteous, we are people who come before God in need of forgiveness. The law teaches us to be dependent on Christ. I think that is why for St Paul the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but to those who are being saved, it is the power of God, it is in our weakness that we discover our dependence on God. I love that translation of the Beatitudes in Matthew's Gospel, 'how blessed are those who know their need of God'.

At General Synod just over a week ago, we were online, it was pretty frustrating because it was so difficult to participate but one of our Diocesan Synod representatives said 'it was worth coming just to hear that prayer of Mother Teresa's that the Archbishop of York prayed', I am going to read it because it so good and it is so good in this area of 'how do you get on with life?' So this is Mother Teresa's prayer:

*People are often unreasonable, irrational and self-centred - forgive them anyway.
If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish and ulterior motives – be kind anyway.
If you are successful you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies – succeed anyway.
If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you – be honest and sincere anyway.
What you spend years creating others could destroy overnight – create it anyway.
If you find serenity and happiness some may be jealous – be happy anyway.
The good you do today will often be forgotten – do good anyway.
Give the best you have and it will never be enough – give your best anyway.
In the final analysis it is between you and God, it was never between you and them anyway.*

It is fabulous in holding a really high ideal before us and not worrying about the way in which others might judge us, think about us, put us down, diminish us, undermine us – just get on with it because it is between you and God. I think that is the sort of thing that Jesus in the Gospels is teaching us, particularly in Matthew's Gospel where there is that strong sense of 'we can't live up to the law but the law teaches us to be dependent on Christ'. It is a very clear relationship, and that relationship is transformed through the teaching, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Through Lent we are on that journey – through the wilderness, towards the cross and on to resurrection, the promised land.

The Kray Brothers' driver was quite a significant figure in my own thinking about ministering on the Isle of Dogs, he was symbolic. I don't know whether he deserved to be in prison, he claimed he hadn't done the murder for which he was committed but 'you don't grass on your friends or on others', so he did his time, that's what he said. I don't know. The judgement is God's. But what I do know is that he exercised quite a powerful role within the life of the church as somebody who came knowing he wasn't perfect and knowing that he too needed to be forgiven in order to function within society in order to live well. That is the task for us, to be honest about ourselves before God, to recognise we are not here because we are perfect but because God loves us and that we are sinners in need of forgiveness through law and through grace, through the cross and resurrection.

To God be glory now and forever - Amen