



Exodus 20.1-17
John 2.13-22
4th March 2018

It's the Law!

Gracious God – we open the bible and long to receive your word – open, we pray, our minds and hearts to receive that word with all its comfort and in all its challenge. Amen.

After a Manse and Car Exchange with a fellow Minister in Brisbane we returned home from Australia thinking that was that until my colleague sent on a letter from the Queensland Police. It contained a lovely photo of the four of us in his car driving to the railway station one Saturday morning. It really was one of the nicest photos of the trip until we realised we had been caught on speed camera. My colleague said – I think the fine is yours not mine, and so it was. We sent over sixty Australian dollars and the thought crossed my mind; that lots of Poms left Britain as criminals to go to the Penal Colonies of New South Wales but I did it the other way around. Left home a freeman and returned home from Oz with a conviction!

This morning we are thinking about laws as the lectionary reading for this third Sunday of Lent takes us to Exodus 20 and the Ten Commandments.

Sometimes religious laws get a bad press.

Over recent years there's been both suspicion and misunderstanding about the nature of Islamic Sheria Law.

In our own Christian traditions we have histories dominated by legalism. I remember looking through the minute book of a Strict Baptist Chapel and reading of Brother Smith barred from worship because he'd been discovered playing billiards on The Sabbath.

And it's very easy to fall into the trap of thinking that all the Scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day just made up more laws or complicated existing ones for the sheer fun of it.

I think it's interesting that one of the first accusations against the original Christians was that they were viewed as 'anti-nomian' – that is as 'law breakers'. It's for that reason that Paul, at least when talking about civil matters, encourages the young churches to be seen as generally law abiding and compliant citizens.

Yet today perhaps the charge against us Christians is often in the opposite direction. We can become caricatured as those with a very negative faith full of 'Thou shalt not' regulations.

So, for a long time, the only two pieces of writing permitted to be displayed on the walls of Parish Churches either side of the altar were The Lord's Prayer on one side and the Ten Commandments on the other.

Yet, neither those commandments that came down with Moses from Mount Sinai, nor the injunctions found in the New Testament are exclusively prohibitive – and to think of faith in such a negative way is actually to believe in the sort of God that many of us would say is simply not there at the centre of our Judea-Christian understanding.

A bad use of religious law is to use it in a way that leads to discrimination and superiority. I think that was an observation Jesus made once on a visit to the temple. He saw a man praying out loud in an ostentatious way and making his offering with a great public flourish. Both acts in some ways meant he was more than doing his bit keeping the religious laws. Yet Jesus thought it was vain window dressing and commends instead the quieter worshipper who prayed with humility and could only give the smallest offering yet, out of her poverty, she made the bigger act of adoration.

The ostentatious law-keeping worshipper looked down on the person next to him and judged her with unkindness – yet Jesus thought the humbler worshipper closer to the heart of God.

So, how might we view religious laws, the Ten Commandments and books like Deuteronomy and Leviticus, more positively – can religious laws ever get a good press?

Well in a way we have to contextualise what was going on as Moses ascends Mount Sinai for this appointment of a lifetime with God.

The Israelites must have felt lost. They had escaped from Egypt but in itself that was never going to be a complete answer. In captivity they at least knew their identity, or lack of it, as slaves. Freedom always presents a challenge of what you do with it and how you use it.

At the moment they were wandering, lost on a journey that seemed to go on forever. What happens on Sinai isn't just receiving new laws but gaining a fuller identity because it is essentially all about entering into a mutually honouring covenant.

There is a technical name for this sort of agreement in the Ancient Near Eastern

world and it's called a 'Suzerainty Treaty'. In those far off days a Suzerain was a king or a lord. So, such a lord or master would make an agreement with his slaves and servants. On one side would be listed all the good things he had done for them and on the other would be the things they would now do in return for such goodness. And all of this was with the understanding in A Suzerainty Treaty that if the slave continued to serve his master well, then the covenant would hold and they would be treated generously.

Something of that atmosphere is found in the giving of The Law on Mount Sinai. God is described as the one who brought his people out of slavery – that's what he has done for them. Now he asks for their loyalty, love and worship. There are two parties to this covenant – both making promises and commitments to the other – this isn't simply a matter of issuing commands from on high – but entering into a covenant of mutual blessing and one that gives the Israelites a unique identity at that time – a monotheistic faith in a polytheistic world.

This is how one bible commentator puts it: The Ten Commandments and the books of law that follow are meant to form Israel as a sacred community, a community rooted in right worship of God and living in justice and peace with one another. It's as if God is saying to them: This is what you were made for. You were not made to wander, to be afraid, to hunger and thirst, to be lost. You were made to live in this community of justice, in right relationship with your God. Stay true to these commandments, and this is where you will remain.

It's for all these reasons that you can basically split the Ten Commandments into two. The first half are all about a relationship with God: No other God but him, not bowing down to idols or taking his name in vain, honouring a day of worship, the second are about the relationship we have with each other, loving our parents and spouses, living in a community without theft, immorality, murder, lies or manipulative jealousy.

One flows from the other.

Perhaps that's why Jesus is so outraged in the Temple. Our second reading has him overturn the tables of the money changes. All of this was going on in – what does he call it – His Father's House – and that is the point. In these very courts the nature and character of God should have shouted out even from the walls themselves. Nothing should have been more prominent in the Temple than God's love and justice. And yet here people were being cheated and short changed. Here, of all places, those unfairly trading, had failed to make the vital connection between worshipping God and honouring neighbour.

So there is a positive about religious law but it only happens when we make a connection. It's that bridge in the ten commandments between parts one and two. Having a framework that promotes the worship of God in a specific way is meant to be a liberating part of our faith in that it is supposed to ethically flow out into a river of compassion, justice and peace that waters and nourishes any community.

Part of the problem with faith when it becomes framed in laws and commandments is that we tend to concentrate of the end result rather than the process of how we get there.

For example Keeping the Sabbath holy or not killing seem at one level quite straightforward. But if we have a view of holiness that takes all the joy out of a day of worship the process of achieving compliance with this command has robbed it of its meaning. And if not killing an armed gunman means a far greater loss of innocent life then we have failed to address the greater good.

Perhaps it's for that reason that Jesus tries to deepen the law rather than abandon it.

He uses the traditional rabbinical technique of saying; You have heard it said, but I say to you... In other words, he teases out a deeper meaning that incorporates process as well as outcome. How we achieve something says as much about us as what we achieve.

Now I want to finish this sermon with a simple thought from St David's Day which was last Thursday.

Some of you follow the Lent Reflections by Brian Draper and I was sent his piece about St David who became Archbishop of Wales and told his people to concentrate on the little things.

In the context of today's reading keeping the whole 613 commandments found in the Old Testament or even all the injunctions found in Paul's letters in the New Testament seems an overwhelming task. So perhaps St David's advice to us is timely: Do the little things. Archbishop Rowan Williams puts it like this – do what's in our reach.

And we can all do that. We can seek to live in love within our family groupings. We can work for justice in our local communities. We can strive to honour God in our corporate worship at church.

This way of life – full of little steps – is within our reach and surely goes a long way in fulfilling the essence of the law which Jesus summed up as loving God with all our heart, mind and strength and then – walking over the bridge between parts one and two of the Ten Commandments and loving our neighbours as ourselves.

May it be so, in the name of the Father, son and Holy Spirit. Amen