

St Marc Grenoble
Sunday 7th March 2021 (3rd in Lent)
Exodus 20: 1 - 7
John 2: 13 - 22
God's Rules

PRAY

Good morning, this morning's OT reading is well known - I'm sure many of you will have instantly recognised it as the first part of the 'Ten Commandments'.

Many British churches and chapels, especially those of an evangelical heritage, have the Ten Commandments boldly displayed in a prominent position - often right at the front, either side of the Communion Table - God's rules clearly displayed for everyone to see, beside God's dining table.

It was often pointed out by my RE teacher, at school, they are clearly written in the Bible, the words copied from the tablets of stone, which God gave Moses on Mount Sinai.

I think we need to explore the context in which they were given: On God's instructions, after years of captivity in Egypt, Moses had led the Children of Israel out of their exile into freedom to serve and worship God again. But, rather than being delighted at being free, the Israelites had started complaining within hours; blaming Moses and Aaron for everything that went the slightest bit wrong.

The Egyptians had pursued them, and the Israelites witnessed God's destruction of their oppressors; yet they still complained that things were not as comfortable as they had been in Egypt - human memories are very short, and often conveniently selective! Moses was at his wit's end in how to lead them in the way God was directing them, which was in itself intended as a time of re-education.

When they reached the desert of Sinai, at the beginning of the third month after their escape from Egypt, God told Moses exactly what he was to say to them, to explain God's covenant - His promise or contract with them.

God made it clear that they had to adhere to God's rules, but, in return, they would be His treasured possession - so, obeying God's rules would bring them the amazing benefits of being His 'chosen people'.

God told Moses to come and meet Him at the top of Mount Sinai - God's holy mountain, where He would meet Moses in a dense cloud - the people would hear God speaking to Moses, and would realise he was God's messenger, so that they would learn to trust Moses.

(where have we heard about that cloud recently? Yes, the pillar of cloud that went ahead of them in the desert, also the cloud that surrounded the disciples at the Transfiguration)

First, the people had to obey strict instructions, to prepare themselves for coming into God's presence; they also had to observe clear limits about how close they could come to the mountain, which was holy, set apart, Godspace. This was Holy Ground indeed.

They were given a clear framework for their relationship with God; it was not to be casual or haphazard - God expected reverence and worship - failure to observe His rules would not be tolerated - on pain of death.

Then, when Moses finally went up the mountain, as he'd been instructed, 'God spoke all these words...' beginning with: 'I AM the Lord your God ... you shall have no other Gods before me' And, so on - the seven verses we heard this morning explain how the people were to relate to, and respect God; clear rules of what they should not do.

Basic rules for observing God's supreme presence in their lives.

The first part of the Ten Commandments, as we know them, is all about how humans should relate to God - the second part (after instructions about keeping the Sabbath) is about how humans should relate to each other.

The Israelites needed these rules because, during their exile in Egypt, they had completely lost touch with God and drifted away from His ways.

If we read on in Exodus 20, v. 18 says: When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain covered in smoke, they trembled with fear ... stayed at a distance, and 'begged Moses to speak to them and promised to listen ... But, they

said, do not have God speak to us or we will die.'

God had made His point; and for the time being, at least, the people understood that Moses was to be their intermediary with God.

We often think the Ten Commandments are God's complete rules; but, in fact, they were just the headlines - or the distilled essence. If you read on in Exodus, there are chapters of rules about how God's people should treat their relationships both with God, and with each other. Rules of correct human justice, social responsibility; religious behaviour and worship responsibilities. It was a complete process of education, or re-education, for the people of Israel, God's special people getting their relationship with Him back on track.

So how did Jesus relate to these rules?

We're told in Mark 12: 28 a religious legal expert, possibly trying to catch Jesus out, asked Him: 'Which commandment is the first one of all?' and Jesus replied: 'The first one is this: Listen, Israel: the Lord your God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all the intelligence, and with all the strength' ... In other words I often say 'Love the Lord your God with everything you've got!'

Then, Jesus went on: 'This is the second one: You shall love your neighbour as yourself'.

So, Jesus beautifully distilled the Ten Commandments into two clear, explicit instructions for life: 'Love God with everything you've got and Love your neighbour as yourself'.

Crisp, simple and straightforward - Jesus changed nothing, but simplified it beautifully. And it remains a clear direction for us today.

So, before we close, let's look briefly at our Gospel reading: John 2 13 - 22

(the story is also told in Mark 11)

Why did Jesus apparently have such a hissy fit in the Temple, driving out the people selling animals for sacrifice and spilling the money changers' money on the ground?

I always had the simplistic understanding that Jesus was objecting to the

temple being used for commercial purposes; and the way people coming to worship were cheated out of their hard earned money; preferring instead that it should be protected as a place, sacrosanct for worship and prayer.

But, Tom Wright explains that there is much more than this explanation. He suggests it's also a 'dramatic, acted out, parable of judgement'; and was, in fact, Jesus' way of announcing God's condemnation of the Temple and everything it had come to stand for in the life of Israel as a nation.

His use of the term 'You have made it into a brigands' cave' referred to the people we'd regard as the ultra orthodox religious people, plotting and being prepared to use violence to further their nationalistic dreams for Israel against the occupying Romans, which was certainly not God's way.

There's a suggestion too, that Jesus was objecting to the way in which the Temple had become a haunt of leaders with a rich and oppressive lifestyle.

Wright suggests Jesus was expressing a warning that the Temple and its guardians were about to face judgement, and redundancy - because, apart from anything else, Jesus was shortly to make the ultimate sacrifice on the cross - once and for all - so that the need for continual sacrifices to be made in the Temple would no longer exist.

But what does all this mean for us, worshipping God, today? Let's keep it simple!

We must not take our relationship with God casually - we must love the Lord our God with everything we've got.

Jesus gave us a new covenant in His blood, sacrificing himself on the cross - the ultimate sacrifice for our redemption and salvation.

He will bless us as His chosen ones, He will protect us and keep us - but it's not just for us: Jesus expects us to share the love He lavishes on us, to reach out, to take the good news - the Gospel, to everyone around us.

We must share His story not only with our words, but also in the way we

live our lives, so that people who meet us think - 'I want some of that joy and inner peace too'.

So I'll say it again:

We must love the Lord our God with everything we've got; and we must love our neighbours as ourselves - starting by sharing the good news of God's love with them.

Let's pray ...