

## For sinners, by sinners

A sermon prepared by Revd Canon Andrew Wright for St Peter's online 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent service 7 March 2021

Refs: Exodus 20. 1-17; Corinthians 1. 18-25; John 2.13-22

I was a painfully and somewhat embarrassingly godly youth. When I left St Edwards, my housemaster was in the habit of making speeches about all the leavers. When it came to me, he said that "when you think of the Ten Commandments and you think of Andrew, you are very glad there are only ten!" What a condemnation of a teenager! A legalistic approach to faith can be very off-putting. In a previous role I had, I used to frequently visit the Outer Hebrides and I was a regular in Stornoway on the famously puritanical Isle of Lewis. On one occasion I was asked to preach at the Free Church of Scotland (the so called "wee frees"). It was packed out, no music allowed of course there except unaccompanied metrical Psalms and all the women in hats. But just before the service the minister came up to me and, deadly serious, asked me to "remove all humour from the sermon". Well, as it happened that cut out the entire first page. It could be a dour place, Stornoway, with nothing open on Sundays and even the children's swings locked up. Not long after that I am told they had a particularly difficult weekend when on the Sunday huge numbers of protestors gathered to oppose the arrival of the first ever Sabbath Day ferry and then on the Monday, I understand, they all simply decamped down the road to the registry office to protest against the Island's first same-sex marriage. But an overly legalistic Christianity is not just limited to the outer islands. As a child in Oxford, I remember one of the elderly ladies in the congregation writing to the parish magazine to say that Christians should not go to the cinema. "It is an organisation run by sinners for sinners", she wrote. The next month my parents responded to point out that the Church too is an organisation run "for sinners by sinners"!

Right, well that would have been way too much humour so let us get serious.

The Ten Commandments have been back in the news recently. Militant attacks in Northern Ethiopia have targeted monasteries and churches. Amongst them The Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion in Aksum where rests, some say, the Ark of the Covenant, containing the tablets inscribed with the commandments, guarded night and day by monks who are forbidden until death to leave the grounds of the church. The story goes that the Ark was brought there after Jerusalem was sacked in 586/587. Well, no doubt Indiana Jones would be excited. Whatever the truth of that story, the commandments remain central to Jewish and Christian traditions – and deeply embedded in our cultural history.

To try and capture the full sweep of the enormously complex plethora of Bible stories in one sentence is very difficult. However, if I was to have a stab, I would suggest that it tells the long tale, as perceived through many human communities, of God reaching out to his people and calling them into a lifesaving and life affirming partnership. Today's readings speak to us of some of the core touchstones of that partnership.

At the heart of the Old Testament is the idea that the basis for partnership is a faithful adherence to God's law. This is not a gloomy, life-denying, "lock up the swings" kind of casuistry<sup>1</sup>, although in some developed later traditions it could become so, something which Jesus himself criticised. In today's Psalm we have already read "*the statutes of the Lord are right and rejoice the heart....more*

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<sup>1</sup> Casuistry is a process of reasoning that seeks to resolve moral problems by extracting or extending theoretical rules from a particular case, and reapplying those rules to new instances.

*to be desired are they than gold....sweeter also than honey*". To live by the law was to walk the path of blessing and fulfilment, a way of living in harmony with God and neighbour and at peace within yourself - a framework for carrying forward that wonderful prophetic summary, "*Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your God.*".

For Jesus, ethical living under the law, as properly understood (the theme of much of the Sermon on the Mount material) remains for him central to the proper partnership with God to which he calls his listeners, involving repentance and right living in preparation for the coming of God's Kingdom. The Commandments remain an important voice into our daily living, a rich source for meditation, reflection and hard decision as we work out our own partnership with God, this Lent and beyond. But there is more.....

Paul, also a Jew and a man of the law, spends much of his ministry reflecting on the commandments, on what they mean, particularly for the new Gentile Christians, and for their significance as "the touchstone" for faith. His problem is that for him they remind him of his complete inability to meet their demands. "If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin", he writes in his letter to the Romans. "I have the desire to carry out what is good, but I cannot do it". For Paul, it is the cross of Jesus which becomes absolutely key to his thinking. As it is here in today's passage from 1 Corinthians.

There is a famous piece of graffiti that was found near the Palatine Hill in Rome. In this a Christian boy is mocked for worshipping a crucified man with a donkey's head. The boy, standing in front of the cross, raises a hand in adoration of this donkey God. Scrawled below the picture are the words "*Alexemenos worships his God*". In the ancient world the donkey was reviled for its stupidity and stubbornness and became a vital metaphor for describing people's foolishness. Christians in ancient Rome were mocked as donkey worshippers. Here in 1 Corinthians Paul alludes very directly to the proclamation of Christ crucified at the very core of his belief – "*a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles*". He knows it sounds crazy in terms of the conventional wisdom and understanding of the day. And indeed, if you pause to think about the cross as the essential sign of our faith, it seems strange, does it not, to have a symbol of torture, death and pain pinned to our lapels or strewn generously around our churches. And yet for Paul it is the death of Christ and its redemptive significance that becomes the absolute prime touchstone for faith. For Paul, the sacrifice of Jesus has an atoning value which makes possible a new relationship with God, for those with faith.

Understanding the nature of that atonement has kept Christians busy for 2000 years and will no doubt do so for many more. For me, but not necessarily for you, the most helpful picture is that of the medieval theologian Abelard who likens Jesus' crucifixion to an axe being taken to a tree. Wherever you slice the tree....low down or high in the branches you can see the character of the tree – its age, the weather it has experienced, illnesses it may have suffered. Abelard suggests that the crucifixion is the moment of history when the character of God is revealed as never before – in his death we see self-sacrifice, an intensity of love, a deep ability to forgive and a refusal to let hate triumph over love. Because of that moment of extraordinary revelation, we are drawn into a lifesaving and life affirming partnership with God, through the power of Jesus' sacrifice and obedience. It is just one way of understanding the atonement but for me it has a great power. Whatever we believe about it, it is clearly a moment of immense and world changing significance. Foolish to many but profound to those who perceive its very unusual wisdom.

I found myself this week re-reading a rather dark poem by the great priest poet RS Thomas. In it he captures something of the dizzying and disorientating confusions which often confront us in life. He called it "Balance" and I quote some lines.

*...I have abandoned  
my theories, the easier certainties  
of belief. There are no handrails to  
grasp. I stand and on either side  
there is the haggard gallery  
of the dead. Those who in their day  
walked here and fell. Above and  
beyond there is the galaxies'  
violence, the meaningless wastage  
of force.....  
Is there a place  
here for the spirit? Is there time  
on this brief platform for anything  
other than the mind's failure to explain itself?*

Our readings suggest two handrails for us in this difficult Lent. The humane and life affirming God-given law which, properly understood and lived, can give our lives balance and richness. But above all the crucified Christ, who suffers with us, in whom we find the God who draws us into his transformational love.

I talked about the ridiculing cartoon teasing Alexemenos for worshipping the donkey-headed God. Perhaps he had the last word because in the next room is scribbled simply "*Alexemenos is faithful*". May God help us so to be.

Amen