

The Third Sunday in Lent

*St Mary the Virgin, St Briavels, and St Mary's Magdalene,
Hewelsfield, 2024*

*Exodus 20:1-17
John 2:13-22*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

In the last place where I was a vicar, up in those rural villages just south of Tewkesbury, I had one church, Deerhurst Priory, which had the tables of the commandments up on the east wall, above the altar. It was something that was done quite often after the Reformation, where colourful paintings and mosaics, or maybe Latin script, would be whitewashed over, and in place of the depiction of an array of Saints, Angels, or whatever, usually two big stone tablets would be put up, or sometimes done in paint, with the commandments written out in English. And so in those sorts of churches, and in Deerhurst every Sunday while I was vicar there, there were the Commandments: a reminder in paint or stone of the proper way to behave. And of course, those of us who go to traditional Prayer Book services still hear the Ten Commandments read at every service of Holy Communion. If the vicar doesn't miss them out!

But outside those types of churches, or outside the BCP, we actually don't read the commandments very often anymore. And it's quite striking to hear them. They, of course, appear here, in the book of Exodus, from which we heard today, and they appear again in Deuteronomy, with some interesting and ever so slight edits. One of the most interesting being that in the Deuteronomy version, the wife of a husband is not described as his property!

I guess the Ten Commandments can feel a bit like representatives of an old-fashioned church, an old-fashioned religion, or even an old-fashioned God, where it is all about following rules and regulations, ticking off the things you have got right, being wracked with guilt about the things you have got wrong, and not very much about the sort of loving relationship that is the way in which, these days, we would usually think about our walk of faith.

But actually if you look carefully at Exodus 20, at the Ten Commandments, they are all about relationship.

I really recommend you going home today, pulling the Bible off your shelf, and just looking again at the passage we heard this morning. When God delivers these Commandments to Moses, to go down the mountain and tell the people, God makes the point that actually these are modes of behaviour, ways of living, that are in response to the things that God has already done.

So for example: 'I am the Lord your God, *who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery*; you shall have no other gods before me.' The reason we should have only one god, and indeed *this* God, the of the Hebrews, is because we have been brought out of Egypt; out of slavery.

And then again a few lines later, 'remember the sabbath day and keep it holy... *Because in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day.*'

Then again: 'honour your father and mother, so that your days may be long *in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.*'

Every commandment is a response, it's the invitation to behave in a certain way, to shape our life in a certain way, because God has already done things for us. He has rescued us, delivered us,

redeemed us from slavery. So we should only worship him. He has created us, formed us, so we should honour our created nature, by making a proper place for rest, for relaxation, for recovery.

He has given us a home. A place to belong. So we should order our own households, bearing that in mind.

So we find that what look like a fairly austere bunch of legal prescriptions are actually an invitation to fully engage, to rejoice in, a relationship with the God who created us, who redeems us, and who wants us to flourish in a place - a *spiritual* place, and we need to be quite clear about that, particularly given what is happening in Gaza that the moment - where we are at home.

And I think that is really helpful when thinking about this reading. There's a lovely scene in the American drama the West Wing, where some American city or state is considering abolishing all laws except the Ten Commandments, and one of the characters who doesn't think this is a very good idea says, 'how on earth you going to enforce not coveting your neighbour's donkey?' And another character says, 'absolutely, and if I *was* accused of coveting my neighbour's donkey, I would probably bear false witness about it!'

That's not, I think, the most helpful use of this text. We have to remember that all of our doing, all of our trying to be better Christians, which is a jolly good thing to try to do, is response to the graces we have already been given. Not, in the first place, a way to get those graces. As I often say; God is not a vending machine. That's not how it works.

Then of course we see the connection with our gospel reading. One of the very rare occasions where we find an angry Jesus. This is not gentle Jesus meek and mild. This is a furious,

indignant Jesus. And he's furious because the place that is supposed to be where you can encounter and feel most in the presence of God has become overtaken by rules and regulations that people have to jump through to get in. Barriers. 'Stop making my Father's house a marketplace.'

This is not a gospel reading tells us we shouldn't have little shops in the back of our churches. We shouldn't be going into churches that host post offices or whatever, and overturning the books of stamps and birthday cards. We read on to the end of the gospel passage and we discover that Jesus is talking about his body. The real temple of God is Jesus himself. And as we learn elsewhere in Scripture, and if I remember to I will introduce the Peace with these words, '*we are body of Christ*'.

So what Jesus is actually prefiguring - this is a bit of enacted prophecy effectively - is a reminder that Christ has no body on earth but ours. And our way of being the body of Christ here on earth, here in the Forest of Dean, *here in St B/H*, is to try to respond the very best we can to the God who has *already* created us lovingly, redeemed us from slavery, and given us the gift of flourishing. So, like most things in this season of Lent, we actually find they are an opportunity for joy, rather than guilt and misery.

Which is not to say that the Ten Commandments are not a jolly good template for us to use every now and then, just to have a look at how our life actually is. Am I taking enough time for proper, deep rest? Or have I fallen into the trap of thinking I am busier than God? How many other things do I allow to become little gods to me, almost without noticing it. And so on. Food for thought, as we journey onward on our pilgrimage towards the empty tomb. Amen.