**Sermon for Lent 3, 7th March 2021**

Exodus 20.1-17

John 2.13-22

The Israelite nation have been wandering in the desert for 40 years, and they are about to enter the promised land. God addresses the nation directly, speaking, what in Hebrew are known as the 10 words, and which we know as the 10 Commandments.

These Ten Commandments set out details of the new relationship between God and his people. They are the mission action plan, the mission statement of how the Israelite nation are to live in relationship to God, and in relationships and in community with each other as they enter the promised land.

For 40 years they have been in that wilderness, sustained daily by manna  and quails from God, and ruled over by Moses and his trusted captains, moving whenever and wherever the guiding cloud of God’s spirit took them. Prior to this they had been in captivity for 400 years. There is going to be a new freedom in this promised land. Freedom that comes from being in a place where there is plenty of food of all varieties, freedom that comes from the unshackling of daily ordering from one campsite to the next, freedom to choose where to live, what crops to grow. They have not known this freedom before, not since Jacob and his sons migrated to Egypt 400 hundred years before. This freedom is not in their psyche, their living experience. They need to have simple ground rules to live by in order that they may flourish, may blossom as individuals but more importantly as a community. So God gives them the Ten Commandments.

There are echoes of this in our current situation. We have been in a mini wilderness for the last year and there are hopes of an easing of restrictions. Just as the Israelites learnt to daily trust God in their wilderness experience, to rely on him for all their needs, a trust that they needed to take forth into the promised land, so there are things that we have learnt in our lockdowns that we need to take forward.

Let’s look more closely at some of the Ten Commandments and see how they can help us.

You shall not murder. I hope none of you are contemplating that. But in Matthew chapter 5 (verses 21-22) Jesus warns us not to be angry with a brother or sister, otherwise we risk coming under judgement, and if we curse them we risk the fires of hell. God is a loving forgiving God and we are called to be likewise. Are there times in this pandemic when you have been angry? Do you need forgiveness? To forgive others?

You shall not commit adultery - one sexual relationship is enough. Jesus takes this even further saying do not look at another person lustfully otherwise you have committed adultery with them in your heart (Matthew 5:27-29). You have cheapened them and marred the image of God in them, and damaged your spouse relationship. We do not need to have a sexual relationship with more than one person. One is plenty. If you have issues with this, or know of someone else who does, or has issues with pornography, be honest with God about them, talk about it with a trusted friend if you can. Pray for those who struggle with this. Pray for families where there is abuse, where people are not honoured and loved.

You shall not steal. Theft can come in many different forms - burglary, identity theft, falsehood, tax evasion and so on. It damages individuals and communities, shows a lack of respect leaving distrust and fear. We are called to deal honestly with each other, to do to others as we would have done to ourselves. Have you been scrupulous in your dealings with others? If not, make amends, put it right.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour. Each of us is made in God’s image - we are called to be truthful and respect and honour each other. Social media can be vicious. Pray for the victims of abuse, of online bullying. Pray for the perpetrators that they may change and know the love of God.

You shall not covet your neighbour’s house; you shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour. God promises to look after the Israelite nation and provide for them. He has done this for the last 40 years and is promising to continue to do so. God is a God of abundance, and he provides out of that abundance. We are called to be content with what we have. The house we live in, the things we possess, the gifts, the abilities and skills we have, the relationships we have and not to yearn after what our neighbour has.

So stop looking across at your neighbour with envy, praise God for what you do have, and ask God how you might use them for His glory, in His service, in the furthering of His kingdom.

All these Ten Commandments point back towards the first -  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.

“One God is plenty,” says God. “You do not need more than one God. So worship Me, make me your only God, none other. Let nothing else, nothing else, take my place of primacy in your life. Me and me only. I am God, let me be God. No other.” says God.

It is amazing that we have a God who loves us and wants to be with us and give abundantly of his love to us. During this pandemic have you spent more time with God? Have you learnt to trust Him more? Rely on Him more? Then continue with this. As more freedom comes, do not allow yourself to be distracted by other things, keep your focus on God, let God be your plenty, what fills and nurtures you.

In putting God first in our life we receive all that he has for us, all that Jesus won for us on the cross - forgiveness, salvation and eternal life. Everything else is insignificant compared to these things. Let the wonder, the enormity of these things take hold of you. They become the light, the strength within us, the rock on which we stand. We do not need more, this is plenty. One salvation is sufficient, one eternal life is sufficient. We do not need a second.

In all of this we have the perfect example of Jesus to look to for inspiration and to receive help from. In clearing the temple courtyard, and declaring that his body is the temple, Jesus is presaging the cross. He will become the one who clears out the rubbish in our lives, the lies and deceit, the corruption, the falsehoods. He becomes the new temple in and through which we encounter God the Father - no longer in a man made building but in our hearts. The rules now become written in our hearts not on tablets of stone. So let Jesus, let the Holy Spirit, whisper their gentle love to you, their rules of living to you and let our one God be plenty. Finish with a poem.

Love by [GEORGE HERBERT](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/george-herbert)

Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back

                              Guilty of dust and sin.

But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack

                             From my first entrance in,

Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,

                             If I lacked any thing.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:

                             Love said, *You shall be he.*

I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,

                             I cannot look on thee.

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,

*Who made the eyes but I?*

Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame

                             Go where it doth deserve.

*And know you not,* says Love, *who bore the blame?*

                             My dear, then I will serve.

*You must sit down*, says Love, *and taste my meat:*

                             So I did sit and eat.

Amen

Further thoughts to consider.

The Israelites lived in the desert, the wilderness for 40 years. We have had one year of intermittent lockdown, one year of limitations. Imagine you are one of the Israelites living in the desert and you are coming to the end of the first year and you know there will be another 39 years in the wilderness. How do you feel about this? Do you say: "Bring it on Lord"?

What comparisons are there between the Israelite community entering the promised land and us with the tantalising hope of less restrictions? What did the Israelites learn in their 40 years, which they needed to take into the promised land? What have we learnt over this past year that we want to carry forward and not lose, particularly in our relationship with God and with each other?

This last year we have seen the benefits of living in an ordered society where most people obey the rules of masks and social distancing. We have a duty of care to each other and to think otherwise is not to accept one's communal responsibilities. But some people have not liked the rules, have not worn masks, have protested against lockdown. Which rules are necessary in our society? Where are the boundaries of individual freedom? If everyone followed the Ten Commandments what changes would that bring to society? Should they be imposed? How can you encourage others to follow these Commandments?

Blessings

Graham