**
Exodus 20.1-17
John 2.13-22
7th March 2021

 A Gift not a Burden**

Over recent years an intrepid group of us from AFC have joined about 500 others in a sponsored walk for Christian Aid, held around May time, and entitled *Circle the City*. We walk some six or seven miles from one church to another getting our card stamped as we look around these fascinating buildings. It soon becomes apparent that London churches come in all shapes and sizes. We are repeatedly told that the ancient ones were built at a time when parliament allowed only two pieces of art to be displayed up by the altar. One was the painted text of the Paternoster, The Lord’s Prayer, the other – often in florid gothic lettering – was The Ten Commandments.

Now, perhaps we long for the time when people knew both the order and substance of these words hung at the front of the church. Maybe we even think it would be good for our grandchildren to learn them by rote as maybe we did in our youth?

Well, our task this morning is to take a second look at these so called Ten Commandments and ask the question of what part they might still play today in anyone’s journey of faith?

I think it’s worth saying at the beginning that these words our group of walkers often saw in those London churches have a context in the Jewish Scriptures. They do not spring from nowhere. In fact, the first two verses of Exodus 20 are a crucial part of today’s reading: *God spoke: I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery…*

Now, everything that follows, flows from these verses. A relationship is being expressed and a shared sense of history is being noted.

God is not a ‘cold caller’. He and these people are already in a relationship. God has blessed Moses and the people, he brought them freedom and now he travels with them through the wilderness.

So, it is in the light of God’s grace, his kindness and the gift of liberation with which he has blessed them, that everything else follows.

The context is one of love in a relationship of mutuality. And if we think of these words as nothing more than merely a law code, then we have dislocated them from their context and ignored the relationship that was already present between God and Israel.

Let me put it like this. I wonder if this has ever been your experience. It’s the end of dinner around the family table. Everyone has enjoyed the food and the banter but now the washing up beckons.

When our children were young (and not so young!) they often needed some encouragement to accept the idea that everyone helped with the dishes. They would even ask that not so innocent question: *Dad, Mum, why do I have to do the drying up?*Now, the shortest answer might well have been: *Because I’m telling you to, and if you do not there’s no pocket money this weekend!* But that, too, would have ignored the context of our relationship. So, the answer came back: *We all join in with clearing the table and doing the dishes because we are family, and that’s what a family, out of a sense of love, does for one another’.*Put such a sentiment into Exodus 20 and the instructions of not making idols, worshiping God alone and not taking his name in vain are given not because this is a law code and these are commandments, but because this God has loved you so much that he brought you out of the land of Egypt and has given you freedom.

Now, sometimes these ancient words are much maligned because they begin with a set of *Thou Shalt Nots*…In fact, in Australia, a common nickname for a Christian is *Wowser*, meaning ‘Kill Joy’.

Yet, maybe just once again, such an understanding doesn’t do them justice.

Just look at that other passage which lists the Ten, Deuteronomy chapter 5. After they have all been given the text ends with these telling and insightful words: *You must be careful to do all this, so that you will live long, prosper and flourish in the land I am giving you…*

Instead of caricaturing them negatively, Deuteronomy encourages us to live them positively. For this is a way of living that shows honour and love not only for God but also for community. Being truthful, valuing life, protecting property, honouring home makers – this is a way of being that preserves life and promotes wholeness.
This is about community and living life looking outwards, considerate of ‘the other’ rather than clinging to that immature notion that I am the centre of my own universe.

In this sense wouldn’t it be right to think of them not as a burden but rather as a gift? These are the Ten Blessings – they bless God, and then they bless those round about us.

Perhaps it is for that reason that I’m not altogether convinced it was ever really a good idea just to stick them up behind the altar as a list. I much prefer other pieces of art I sometimes see in London churches – like the bronze of St Martin, in the church that bears his name off Trafalgar Square. It shows St Martin tearing his cloak in half to share with a beggar in a snowstorm. A piece of art reflecting generosity of spirit and a belief in community – tenets of belief that are, in fact, behind everyone of the Ten Commandments, yet for me it’s so much easier to see the presence of God in a loving action than it ever is in a law code.

I also wonder about our relationship with the Ten Commandments and whether I’m really engaging dynamically with them rather than viewing them as staid and static injunctions.

Maybe there is a touch of irony in what I’m about to say in that I’m not sure we should view them as set in stone which, of course, is exactly what they were in the story of Moses receiving them on the mountain!

Today when we use that phrase *set in stone* in conjures up a certain intransigence, whereas maybe we are meant to view the genre of Jewish Law through a more evolutionary prism.

There is something very dynamic with the way a Rabbi would engage with his students by saying: *You have heard it said, but I say to you…* What would follow would an hour or a day of debate about how a religious idea, principle or law could develop and be applied differently in a specific situation yet still maintain the integrity of its original meaning.

That seems to be going on already in that ancient time when Exodus and Deuteronomy are written. In Exodus we are told one of the commandments was not to covert your neighbour’s wife. That treated the woman as a possession, as a thing rather than a person. By Deuteronomy that commandment has changed to: *You shall not lust after your neighbour’s wife.* The woman was no longer boxed in with material possessions like the house or the farm animals but is now given the respect of being a human being. The law was evolving, deepening and maturing as it was being applied.

We need to be excited about faith and work hard at it.

I remember, during my school days, two teachers who could not have been more different, who drew from us two polerised responses. My history teacher had us every Friday afternoon for a double session in one of those temporary mobile classrooms that was too cold in winter and boiling hot in summer. He never really engaged with us; it was all suffocatingly passive. Mr Quartermain came in, opened his double ring binder file and basically read his notes to us for two hours. If he ever looked up, he would have seen us dropping off to sleep in a lesson that basically became an exercise in dictation. He simply thought we should absorb, without exploration, his views on the Vikings or the Tudors.

Mr Davies, the music teacher could not have been more different. We travelled with him to village churches to play their organs and spent hours sharing our fledgling compositions with him and our fellow students in class. It was interactive, dynamic and most of us loved it.

I sense we need to work harder at the Ten Commandments and try to get really involved in what they are saying, because it was never enough to think that simply reciting them is the same thing as living by them.

The former Chief Rabbi, the late Jonathan Sacks writes this: *Fundamentalism is the belief that timeless religious texts can be translated directly into the time bound human situation, as if nothing significant has changed.*

Take, for example, the concept of not bowing down to idols. Maybe we think that is an easy one, so we tick the box with little thought and move on.

Yet maybe we should linger a while over those words *You shall have no other gods beside me, and you shall not make a carved image for yourself.*

If we engage dynamically with the text, mull it over and search for its meaning today perhaps we would conclude that all of us tend to make God in our own image. It is what human beings inevitably do. If we are a sort of judgmental person, I suspect its more than possible we believe in a judgemental God. If we are liberal individual it’s likely our view of the Divine is more fluid. The problem isn’t our starting place, which is often understandable, it’s our tendency to stick there rather than be open to scripture and experience to change, mature and deepen our evolving understanding of God. It’s in the sticking that we, as it were, make God into the wrong sort of image.

So, what to make of these ancient words, sometimes described as the basis of our rule of law, The Ten Commandments or, as I hinted at earlier on, The Ten Blessings.

And I believe that is very much the purpose behind them, given as a gift and not a burden so that we might be a blessing to God and each other in the lives we live.

But why keep them? We even strive to live by them?

The answer is love. The God of love who journeys with us all, who leads us towards wholeness and true freedom, is the God who guides us in love and in Jesus shows us what such a life of love, service and trust looks like.

In the 1964 production of Fiddler on the Roof there is a wonderful song, sung by Tevye to his wife Golde entitled *Do you love me…*

Perhaps in a moment of self-doubt he asks his down to earth, undemonstrative wife if she really loves him. She replies that she cooks for him, washes his shirts, takes care of his children. But Teyve presses the point not realising that, in fact, she has already answered his question. Hers are not just domestic chores but acts of love. She shows her love by her actions. By the way she lives, in the care she takes over him and their daughters, the food she prepares and the home she creates, everyday her life exudes love.

Our love for each other and for God will be shown not by repeated a law code, even if it is the one hung up in gothic type behind the altar. It will be shown in the way we live and in these ten different ways to be a blessing to God and one another.

For as Jesus says in John: If you love me, then keep my commandments.

May it be so, in the name of God who longs to bring us healing, wholeness and liberty. Amen.