

Readings and Sermons 3rd Sunday in Lent

11th March 2012

Readings

Exodus 20.1-17

2 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 3 you shall have no other gods before me. 4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, 6 but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. 7 You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. 8 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labour and do all your work. 10 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. 11 For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. 12 Honour your father and your mother,

so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. 13 You shall not murder. 14 You shall not commit adultery. 15 You shall not steal. 16 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour. 17 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.

1 Corinthians 1.18-25

18 The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.' 20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

John 2.13-22

13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.
14 In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. 15 Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. 16 He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!' 17 His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.' 18 The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' 19 Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' 20 They then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' 21 But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 22 After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Rev'd Dr Anna Wallis -Sunday Eucharists

I wonder how you felt this morning as you heard the ten commandments read out this morning –alienated, bored, irritated perhaps? I'm pretty sure that not many of you felt excited or inspired!

In a church I worshipped in for a while as a student, above the altar, in huge gold letters, were written the Ten Commandments. They dominated the whole building. To church members they were part the furniture; but as a stranger they seemed stern, unfriendly, uncompromising – and I am sure they were a factor in my eventual decision to move on to another church.

There are good historical reasons why the Ten Commandments are prominently displayed in many churches. During the Reformation, when Henry VIII formed the Church of England, the statues and crucifixes of Roman Catholicism were obliterated and their central role given to the Commandments. To Christians of the sixteenth century the Ten Commandments summed up the essentials of Christian morality. Thus for four hundred years the Commandments have been woven into the fabric of western society. As the foundation of our legal system, they used to appear in and on public buildings up and down the country – in the United States they still do.

They are a brilliant set of rules which allow human beings to co-exist peacefully together and to avoid getting carried away by their own importance.

But therein lies the problem: while most people see that the need to have some rules, few of us really like being dictated to. Worse than that: the vast majority of these rules start with the words: "You shall not". Not only do we not like being told we can't do something, our brains are wired to screen out the word not.

Don't think of a pink elephant!.... [What are you all thinking of?] See what I mean?

The church was effective at teaching 'thou shalt not' that even now I regularly met people who know very little about my religion but are certain that it means there's a long list of things I can't do.

Jesus however, summarised the 10 commandments as "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself."

In other words, it's about what we do, not about what we don't do, or shouldn't do. Actions speak louder than words. Our actions tell people who we are and what we stand for.

Jesus drove the moneychangers and the animal sellers out of the Temple because their trade exploited worshippers. They charged the equivalent of 2 days wages for most of the population, for even the smallest offering prescribed under Jewish Law. They should have been providing a service to their community, instead they were feathering their own nests often at the expense of the poorest in Jewish society.

Jesus calls us to put the welfare of other people before our own, to refuse to pursue our own gain at the expense of other people's interests. This week 6 men who sacrificed their lives because they put the interests of their country before their own.

As a result many people have wanted to honour them, to sign the book of condolence, to sit and reflect, or to lay flowers in the Market Square – actions are a powerful way to express our feelings precisely because they communicate what is important to us.

Self sacrifice is out of fashion: it means standing against the cultural norms, refusing the received wisdom that who you are can be divorced from what you do. The Christian Gospel calls us to engage with our world and try to change it: to increase peace and justice wherever we can. Few of us will die to attempting bring peace and stability to a foreign country; but we no less involved in decisions and actions that have lasting consequences. We make thousands of decisions every day that affect others: the way we care for elderly relatives and demanding children; the

way we treat our friends and complete strangers. We are all presented with endless opportunities to exploit others for our own gain or to treat them as we would like to be treated ourselves – even when that demands self-sacrifice.

For Christians, this is what it means to accept the discipline of Lent; it is not easy; we will not always achieve it, but is within reach of all of us, whatever our circumstances and our decisions will change the world – for better or worse .