

Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost. 10 Commandments

“He has been gone for a while now. I wonder what is going on? The world seems such a dangerous place! Anything could happen any minute! Maybe we should just get on and take over doing things ourselves? Maybe we got all this wrong? Maybe there isn’t any plan or direction!? What about if we just try to work out something new which will just make us all feel happy and keep everything peaceful?”

I might be talking about how the people of Israel were thinking as they sat in the desert at the bottom of the mountain waiting for Moses to return.

I might be talking about how some people are wrestling with what it means to be the church in the 21st century!

The idea that we should make this whole experience of life and even religion something which is easy and always positive and shaped according to our wants and the things we like, that idea that we should always opt for the easy path, is very pervasive. I am not saying that we should just be choosing to make things as difficult as possible. When I was preparing a congregation to change from hard pews to more comfortable and flexible seating two people told me that we had to keep the pews because “we are supposed to be uncomfortable in church!”

It has been a tendency for the post WW2 generations in the western world to try to shape our lives so that any hard and confronting edges are smoothed off and the easiest, smoothest, most peaceful path in life is created for ourselves. Sadly, that approach has had several consequences. We don’t cope very well with lean and difficult times, disagreement and conflict and hard choices. We may also presume that what people around us are also wanting is just a happy experience and so church can drift more towards entertainment than substance, more something which is just ‘done’ rather than gritty, confronting yet grounded reality.

Another approach to life has been to believe that life is hard and is not going to change. That approach has two streams at least. One is brutally pessimistic, taking dark inspiration from the 17th century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes who wrote: “the life of man, [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” Not much joy there!! Another approach seems more optimistic but is essentially escapist, taking inspiration from perspectives such as that of Oscar Wilde, the 19th century Irish playwright, who wrote: “We are all in the mud, but some of us are looking at the stars.”

WE are people of hope though. And that hope is grounded in reality and real, honest perspectives on humanity, ourselves and, most of all, God.

Back to the base of Mount Sinai. Moses had disappeared. He was gone for ages. When he came back he had a LOT to tell the people. We only get the very first part of that in the reading we had today from Exodus 20. The instruction went on for several chapters. Then Moses went away again. Again he was gone for a long time and it was only at that time that the two tablets of stone were created with the law written down. That is 12 chapters later than what we read today, and when Moses came back with the tablets that time the people had opted for the DIY version of religious practice and were worshipping a golden calf instead.

Why were the people in the desert trying to run away from Moses and God and the message? It seemed too hard. They wanted something easier and more immediate.

The direction for life given through Moses and which we have as the 10 commandments is hard. It is not an easy path to follow. A lot of what makes it hard is that it is NOT actually just a list of rules to obey. It is NOT just a set of instructions and if we manage to tick all the boxes then we are in the good books. The direction for life given there on the mountain, and filtered and focussed and clarified through the thousands of years since, is an invitation to engage in life with deep respect, to take the principles of what makes for the best possible interaction and to apply them to more than just a few specific things, but to let them seep into all of our living. It is an invitation to be authentic and integrated.

That is a lot harder than just following a few rules. It is like the difference between ONLY doing the speed limit when passing a speed camera or when you see a police car in the area OR driving always within the limits and

with exceptionally due care for other road users and for yourself and your passengers. One is just observing the law in a narrow way. The other is living it.

Jesus, as recorded in Matthew 22, summarised 'the law' as 'love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and love your neighbour as you love yourself'. It all comes down to this. Jesus wasn't making it easier. He wasn't softening what we find in the directions for life which we read back in the Old Testament. Jesus was cutting to the heart of what it is about. When we love God, what will we do and say and think about God? Where and how will we show respect? Will that love sit inside us all the time or just when it is convenient or someone is watching?

Love our neighbours. What will that look like? Is that easy? It means a deep respect and care and desire for others around us to flourish, and to be treated with respect, and to be able to be free from persecution and bullying and marginalisation. The second section of the 10 commandments goes into that. It is not just about what we do or don't do to those around us but also the values we seek to encourage in others, the values we stand up for and which infuse our relationships. Passion for justice, social action, desire for acceptance and inclusion, breaking down barriers of prejudice ... all these come from a deep living of these instructions in godly living taken into our perspective on life.

I read a fascinating article this week from the Washington Post titled "Want millennials back in the pews? Stop trying to make church 'cool.'" Rachel Evans teases out some of what is deeply off-putting to the generation which has been abandoning the church in droves. Part of it is about authenticity. Church communities which have opted for a style of being which is entertainment without substance just don't hold young people, at least not for long. And church communities which have a veneer of being 21st century cool and engaged BUT which have harsh and judgemental attitudes are VERY off-putting. These are the church communities which do not take seriously the gospel and covenant calls to embrace the stranger, really meet the poor with generous loving response, to be inclusive, to be open to diverse ways in which God is at work transforming lives and which fail to protect the most vulnerable around and among us.

Rachel quotes some friends who had deep insights to offer. One said: "I want a service that is not sensational, flashy, or particularly 'relevant.' I can be entertained anywhere. At church, I do not want to be entertained. I do not want to be the target of anyone's marketing. I want to be asked to participate in the life of an ancient-future community." Another reflected: "Sometimes I need to worship in the midst of my brokenness and confusion - not in spite of it and certainly not in denial of it."

Millennials want to know that there IS something worth striving for, that we are not all just in the mud. They don't want the easy paths, which is also why they sometimes bump up against older generations who expect them just to do things as they have been done BY previous generations.

Authenticity. Integrity. Respect. Love. When that is the place where our hearts are, each and as community, then it shows, it IS attractive. The sacraments we celebrate, the words we speak, the songs we sing, the welcome we offer, the hope we share, the invitation we give to share the journey with us are not just things we do but they are who we are.

In a few weeks time we will begin reflecting on our life together and one of the fundamental questions will be "Who do we believe God is calling us to BE?" before we get to thinking about what we are called to DO. What we find in the scriptures says to me that we are called to be people with integrity, people who love and live authentically the invitation which God places in our hearts. That invitation goes back at least as far as those commandments. And further. And the ripples of living and being in that way will take us into the future.

Amen.

Paul Mitchell