

Overruled?

Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, Sunday 4 March 2018 – Lent

Readings:

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

1. When I saw that the Old Testament reading for today was the **Ten Commandments**, my first impulse was to ignore this text and focus on the passage we read from John's gospel, with Jesus chasing the merchants and money-changers out of the Temple – surely that is a much more dynamic passage.
But on a closer look, I found Exodus 20 to be more interesting than I had thought.

Why do we avoid the Ten Commandments? They tend to evoke **negative associations**:

- punishment, a stern God threatening the people to make them obey; a God of extreme judgement, even to the point of what we would find unjust, 'visiting the sins' of one generation on the following ones; a God of power and dominance;
- dos and don'ts – and the discomfoting realisation that we can never live up to them fully;
- As the Apostle Paul teaches, Law makes us painfully aware of our brokenness, what the Bible calls sin, turning us to Christ and the message of repentance and forgiveness.
- John 1: 14+17: 'The Law came through Moses, but grace and truth through Jesus Christ.'

2. **So are the Ten Commandments now 'overruled'?**

No – and yes.

According to Mt 5:17, Jesus himself said he had 'not come to abolish the law and the prophets' but to fulfil them.

A closer look at the context of the Ten Commandments gives us a more nuanced look at this pivotal passage in the OT and points forward to the NT. I also believe that a deepened understanding of 'law' in the OT can help to deepen our understanding of the gospel and the way it permeates every facet of our lives.

3. **Context of Ex. 20:**

According to the Exodus narrative of the Israelites' long wanderings through the 'wilderness' after fleeing the oppression of Egypt, they rejoiced when they reached the foot of Mt Sinai because the 'promised land' was within their sights. At this point, as Ex. 19 tells us, God made a covenant with the people. This covenant was

different from the covenant God made after the flood, which was one-way: God promised never to wipe out life on Earth on such a grand scale again. The covenant between God and the God's people in Exodus 19 is two-way:

Ex. 19:4-8 (God speaking to Moses):

'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.

So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. The people all answered as one:

"Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do."

4. God gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments, via Moses, as the cornerstone of this covenant, and they reflect its two fundamental pillars: **liberation** and **relationships**. These two pillars give each other meaning: God's people are liberated to live in a relationship of love and obedience with their God and other people. They live out these relationships in fullness of life, liberated to love God and love each other. At least, that is the aim of the covenant and the Ten Commandments. We know, of course, that the Israelites fall down at every turn, as we do. Nevertheless, this story of liberation and of a life lived in relationship at many levels is also central to our lives as gospel people.

5. **Liberation**

Ex. 20:2 – The Ten Commandments begin not with a commandment, but with a statement of identity:

'I am the Lord your God, who rescued you from the land of Egypt, the place of your slavery.'

- Who God is: liberator, God of the Israelites: I am *your* God, the one who rescued you.

- Who the people are: a liberated people, freed from slavery to be God's own people.

The message is clear from the start: **Always remember where you came from and who brought you here. That will tell you who you are.** That is your identity. This message is repeated at many points in the books of the law:

Dt 6: 20-21, 23-24 (a key passage, very important still to Jewish people):

'When your children ask you in time to come, "What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded you?" Then you shall say to your children, "We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand ... to give us the land that he

promised on oath to our ancestors. Then the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive, as is now the case.”

The Israelites are liberated to be the people of God, and given commandments to give them ongoing life. As in creation, God orders and structures the created world to maintain life, preventing the chaos from returning (Gen. 1: the earth is unformed, ‘chaos’ before creation). The commandments are thus life-giving for the people of Israel. Moreover, the commandment to keep the Sabbath, the day of rest in every week, is anchored in the activity of God as Creator (Exodus 20:8-11). Even the animals are allowed to rest. In other words, the commandments are live-giving not just for humans, but for everything God created. Our relationships thus also embrace the non-human created world around us.

We, too, are a liberated people, the people of our God, and we are part of God’s creation. And as the Apostle Paul puts it, we are, in Christ, new creation. That is where we come from and who we are.

However, it is all too easy for us, like the Israelites, to take our eyes off the one who freed us. The Golden Calf in Ex. 32, which the Israelites crafted when Moses had been on Mount Sinai for a very long time and they thought he would not return, illustrates what happens when the people defy the first commandment – the commandment to have no other gods before God, their creator and liberator: chaos returns and threatens to destroy the community entirely. The people of God become un-created. If we worship other gods, we deny our own humanity because we were created for relationship with our creator and have been freed to live that relationship in its fullness. If we forget where we have come from, other gods take over and enslave us. We attribute to them a power over us that they have no right to exert. We easily become dependent on them, fearing that without them we may not be able to survive or thrive.

What sort of ‘gods’ might we become dependent on, things that rob us of the fullness of life? That make us forget that we have been liberated and now live by grace?

- the attachment to money
- status, the need to get ahead (this can easily happen in the workplace – are we hurting other people in the process, or exploiting them?)
- addictions, including the addiction to control – having to be in control all the time
- individualism: a sense of entitlement to choose independently instead of accepting our reality as children of God, created beings who are made for community
- feelings of guilt – e.g. if we have let someone else down or inflicted pain on them, damaged ourselves ... the inability to take forgiveness seriously

- anger, bitterness
- dependency on positive feedback ('Likes')
- peer pressure (a lesser sense of worth if we are not like the others)
- complacency? When we see something that we know is oppressing others around us, and we know there is something we could do, but we are too comfortable to do anything about it?
- an unhealthy dependency on another person
- - a particular ideology or position on a moral issue (e.g. abortion)
- a fixed view of God that has no room for change or development
- in the church: the fear of splitting the church? A lack of faith and flexibility? Power thinking, hierarchies? Fear of dissenters, fear of change? A rigid interpretation of Scripture? Fears of dwindling funds and people?
- the rules we make for ourselves, as individuals and in the church: e.g. I am only a good Christian if I manage to read the Bible every day. Or: I am only a good person if I visit my elderly neighbour twice a week or give a certain amount to the church ... Some of these rules are extremely subtle.

All of these dependencies can be false gods if we let them dominate our lives. Continually remembering where we have come from means being constantly on a journey, as individuals and faith communities, a journey with God, each other and the world we live in. Every day we see the world anew through the lens of liberation, forgiveness and grace. Being recreated daily, we expect God to show us new things. We need to be open to that, and trusting. God is not static, and neither are we. And that brings us to the theme of **relationships**.

6. Relationships

Jesus sums up the law and the commandments in the Great Commandment that is quoted in all gospels apart from John's gospel. In Mark 12:29-31, Jesus is asked by one of the scribes which of the commandments is the greatest. He replies: *'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."*' The first commandment, governing our relationship with God, is a quote from Deuteronomy 6:4-5. Jesus adds the horizontal dimension, loving our neighbour as ourselves, which is also a quote from the law given to the Israelites, found in Leviticus 19:17, where this command sums up a detailed list of commandments describing what loving one's neighbour means in that context: leaving a part of the harvest for the poor and the traveller, for example, or paying a hired worker their wages promptly. For Jesus, the two commandments are inseparable. Terence Fretheim, Lutheran theologian from the

USA, says the first commandment Jesus cites 'lays a claim: how you think about God will deeply affect how you think about, and act toward, your neighbour'. This connection is also fundamental to the Ten Commandments.

Nowadays we are beginning to realise that our neighbours include the generations that come after us. It follows that God would have us act justly towards them, not because it will gain us any more favour with God but because we are children of the God who will create them just as God created us. Remembering where we have come from, as created and liberated people, we take responsibility to work out what acting justly means in our relationships with coming generations. One aspect, for example, might be not coveting the world's resources when we know they will soon be depleted if we keep going as usual.

God is relational. Jesus, sent by God, walked on this earth to lead people back home, back to God, through the message of repentance and forgiveness. It was a message, and a life, that took Jesus to an excruciating death – and in Lent we move towards the commemoration of that death. That is how much God loved the world, as John 3:16 tells us. In John 13:34, Jesus gives his disciples a new commandment: to love one another as Jesus has loved them. The only way we can love God so utterly and love our neighbours in liberated relationships is if every day we are mindful of where we have come from, of the love and grace of God that enables us to keep on the move, as individuals and communities, and constantly reminds us of how much we have been given and forgiven.

A small personal anecdote in closing:

In 2005 my husband and I travelled to Birdsville to join a group of people driving across the Simpson Desert in a kind of road retreat. In Birdsville, the patrol pastor of the Uniting Church who had driven us part of the way asked if we would like to go up onto a nearby plateau to watch the sun go down. So we did. Standing on top of that flat rock, we could see the flat expanse disappearing in unending distance below us, and around us for almost 360 degrees. I remember as the sun started to go down, how I suddenly felt a wave of relief, as if a voice were saying to me: It's OK, the day's over, be at peace, be forgiven; tomorrow's another day, another chance.

I will never forget that moment.

Amen.

(Glenine Hamlyn)