

### **The 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent 2024. Exodus 20:1-17 The Ten Commandments**

This morning we are looking in a bit more detail at one of the most well-known passages in the Old Testament, the ten commandments given to Moses on Mt Sinai. These used to be said not just in Lent, but each week and are in 1<sup>st</sup> order of Holy Communion (p.101, *APBA*).

They could be read as the Old Testament version of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The way to live in perfect harmony with God, God's creation, and each other.

In the wilderness after escaping slavery in Egypt, God created a brand-new people for himself and gave them the Law. God called them and named them.

In the same way, the birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus creates in us, when we believe, a brand-new creation when we are transformed by the renewing of our minds by the Holy Spirit. God calls us and names us.

We, like the Hebrew's get a new identity. When we seek, through faith alone, the Kingdom of God and its righteousness, we get a new name. Just as the descendants of Abraham, Issac, and Jacob received the new name, Israel; our new name is children of God.

We seek to be this new creation, to be true to Jesus and live up to our new name, but almost invariably we falter. Something in life — some misplaced desire, some grief, some reckless act — takes over where our new selves ought to be, and we find ourselves lost.

This is one of the reasons we mark this season of Lent - to acknowledge our lostness and return to the Lord. For centuries, preachers have spoken of losing sight of God as 'wandering in the wilderness' precisely because the description is so apt.

So often we wander through life; losing ourselves, forgetting where we are actually going, and constantly forgetting God.

But out of his great love for us, God seeks again to call us, to enfold us within a community of fellow travellers, to provide us with a place and a way of living, and to say, "*This* is what you were made for."

So we have much in common with the Hebrews in the wilderness.

When Exodus 20 opens, God has already blessed his new people amazingly. Israel has been liberated purely by the hand of God from slavery in Egypt after 400 years and has set out into the wilderness.

The people have encountered thirst and hunger, and God has provided sweet water and bread from heaven. They have been attacked by the Amalekites and God gave them victory. Now they have reached Sinai.

There, in chapter 19, just before today's reading, God makes a covenant with Israel: Israel will be God's treasured possession, a priestly kingdom and a holy nation, if the people keep their end of the covenant. Israel must follow God's commands if they are to remain God's people.

Chapter 20 sets out these commands and in so doing continually points us back to why we, like the Hebrews, are formed into new life and a new body. Reminding us that we are a part of the story of God's intention for all of humanity that began so long ago.

Our passage today begins with God identifying himself as the one "who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery," (v.2).

However, this statement also serves to remind the people of who *they* are: they are precisely the ones whom God delivered!

Again serving as a reminder of our loving Father's identity as our liberator and our own identity as those having been liberated.

Reaching farther back in time, the commandment to 'Honour your father and mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you,' recalls the father and mother of the multitudes to whom that land was first promised, around 500 years earlier

The God who appeared to Abraham and Sarah is the same God who appears to Moses now, and the people are those who bear Abraham and Sarah's names.

Our reading this morning goes even further back to show us that this plan of God – brought to perfection in Jesus Christ – echoes the very creation of the world. In v.4 today we hear the language of "heaven above," "earth beneath," and "water under the earth" recalling the same words used in the first creation told in Genesis 1 and 2.

The God who separated those waters at the creation is the only god who is worthy of worship. The same Spirit that hovered over the water, whom we call the Lord, the Giver of Life, is creating a new people for God in the wilderness at Sinai and creates new life in us the moment we believe. God is constantly creating and renewing life.

In all these ways, today's reading demonstrates that God is the creator and that we, his children, his people, are the *created*, and that the harmony and order that God established in creation is once again established through God's law in the community of the Israelites.

Because Jesus is the absolute fulfillment of the Jewish Law; that same harmony and order is created once again for all time through us, the true body of Christ.

Interpreters of the Ten Commandments often divide the passage into commands regarding worship – the first 5 commandments, (vv.1-11) and commands governing human relationships, commandments six to ten (vv. 12-17). But the two sets of commandments are, I think, better understood as intertwined throughout.

It is all about our identity.

Laws concerning proper worship of God are also about how the people are formed through that worship to be a certain kind of people. Laws concerning how people are to relate to one another are also about living as God requires, even doing as God does.

The Ten Commandments, and the books of law that follow (all 613 of them), are meant to form Israel as a sacred community, a community rooted in right worship of God and living in justice and peace with one another.

The Israelites are to live as neighbours to one another, the foundation of which is knowing the God to whom they belong.

Sinai has been the place to which God has been leading all along, and not just from the escape from Egypt. The whole journey, from creation forward, has been leading to this place. It is at Sinai that God shows the Israelites the harmonious world in which they're meant to live and calls them to live in it.

It's as if God is saying, '*This* is what you were made for. You were not made to wander, to be afraid, to hunger and thirst, to be lost. You were made to live in this community of love and justice, in right relationship with your God.

Stay true to these commandments, and this is where you will remain.'

If we are willing, we will be led to a place where God will say this to us as well. Let us as a parish, allow our Lord to lead us there too.

Of course, we don't stay true. No matter how hard we try, we just don't. So in this, the third Sunday in Lent, let's look back to Sinai as a signpost, ever reminding us of the holy and sacred community for which we were made, the very body of Christ himself.

It is Christ calling us back to God through *his* body, broken for us on the cross.

Let me pray the prayer that Paul prayed for the Ephesians, which is perfect for this day:

*"Dear Father, we kneel before you, from whom our whole family in heaven and on earth derive our name.*

*Out of your glorious riches strengthen us with power through the Holy Spirit in our inner being, so that Christ may truly dwell in our hearts by faith. I pray that we, being rooted and established in love, may have power to grasp just how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses all knowledge – that we may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*

*And now to you Father, who are able to do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine, according to the power that is at work within us, to you be all glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus, through all generations, for ever and ever" (Eph 3:14-21)*