**21st May 2017**

**Exodus 20:1–20**

Electing a new government is mainly electing our new lawmakers. Those who will have the power to shape our society. Part of the outcry against our membership of the European Union was because we don’t like ‘foreigners’ telling us what to do – whether it’s how straight our bananas should be or how much cocoa should be in our chocolate.

A lot of people don’t like any one telling them what to do and one of the biggest obstacles to faith is that people want to be free, they don’t want to come to church and be preached at about how they should live their lives!

Today’s reading picks up the story of the Hebrews’ escape from Egypt, where they had been held as slaves. Moses, the leader appointed by God, takes delivery of the Ten Commandments as he is leading them through the wil­derness of the Sinai region to God’s land of promise.

The original form and Hebrew language in Exodus 20 suggest that the commandments first may have been simply a list of ten words – murder, idolatry, adultery, and so on. These words were shorthand for a rule of life to guide the people of Israel along their journey to becoming the nation that was promised to Abraham.

Before I left my college training for ministry I had to share with my tutor about my rule for life. It included things like how I would spend my money, how I would spend my time, what were the priorities for my life, how I would live out my Christina faith. It is a good exercise for anyone to do. They say that if you don’t live by your priorities you live by the pressures on you.

The Ten Commandments summarize God’s rule for life. In the first commandment (this is not a hobby or a past time – the first commandment) we are told to acknowledge God as God alone, and are called to honour our relationship with God. In the commandment regarding Sabbath, we are told to match the rhythm of our lives with God’s own rhythm. In the remaining commandments, God’s loving wisdom lays out how to live so that our relationships with other people reflect God’s relationship with us.

Protestant theologian Martin Luther (1483–1546) taught that every negative in this list implies a positive. For example, “do not kill” implies “support the living.” The commandments offer a vision of the world that God promises to bring to fulfilment. Indeed the Hebrew word for ‘You shall not’ could equally be translated as ‘you will not’ implying a change in desire and outlook as one’s relationship with God changes from rebellion (no one tells me what to do) to friendship (please guide me and show me how to live well and abundantly). Luther said our basic human problem was that our hearts ‘curved in on themselves’. We are too self-obsessed. The commandments are clear and summarised by Jesus –‘Love God, and love your neighbour as you love yourself’. The key antidote is to ***uncurve the heart*** – to get beyond your own self –to open up to God and your neighbour.

Desire is the key. Relationship is the key. Rules without relationship will always be legalistic and lead to defiance.

There is the old joke about Moses coming back down the mountain and saying to the Israelites:

‘I’ve got some good news and some bad news. The good news is that I’ve managed to keep God down to Ten Commandments. The bad news is that adultery is still one of them’

Rules within relationships will be about agreeing the best way to live together well.

In a school or institution rules are a means of putting an ethical framework into place the underlying principle should be that of consideration for and courtesy towards others: all rules have that as their aim – the protection of the weaker against the stronger, the inhibition of insensitive actions against others. The political parties vary on the value of the markets to deliver good for all citizens and so to varying degrees offer greater or lesser regulation – boundaries to curb dangerous greed and excess. We are learning that once again human nature needs boundaries if we are to live responsibly and in consideration of all, especially the weak.

Boundaries, inhibitors, commands, rules are not sexy! Most people’s reactions are to try to bend them. If the speed limit is 30 you drive at 40. If you tell your teenager they can’t drink alcohol until they are 18 they are tempted at 16. Rules always seem a killjoy. We live in a culture that doesn’t like to be told how to live our lives. We don’t want the nanny state. Likewise we don’t want the nanny God.

The Ten Commandments give the impression of an authoritarian God. Certainly many passages in the bible give that impression. But context is important. The people of Israel are on their wilderness journey escaping from slavery and oppression in Egypt. In Exodus 19 we find them at the mountain of Sinai. The giving of the Ten Commandments becomes a sign of God’s covenant with the people of Israel. They are a practical outworking of God’s intention for God’s people to live whole and healthy lives. The intention is to establish a social rule that contrasts to life under Pharaoh so the first thing that is said is ‘I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt out of the land of slavery’. What they hear next in the Ten Commandments are God’s strategy for fending off a return to the pre Exodus conditions of exploitation and brutality within the community. The commandments are policies intended to create a society that practices God’s justice instead of Pharaoh’s injustice, and to establish neighbourly well-being instead of coercion, fear, and exploitation.

What policies were indispensable to prevent a return to pre Exodus exploitation? You could consider all ten of these commandments but there are three broad themes. The first three commandments assert that there is only one God, who cannot be recruited or used for any social or human agenda.

When we make what is not God, God – things start to go wrong. Nationalism, materialism, success, status, are often quoted as the idols of our time. When we make what is not god God we lose perspective and we become enslaved to gods that have not got our best interest first. Money of course is the biggest idol of our time and this god causes no amount of anxiety and chaos and envy. It needs cutting down to size to ensure that it serves the interests of society and not the other way round

The second set of commandments concern human social relationships. They seek to make human community possible by setting limits to the acquisitive capacity of members of the community – the capacity to seize and confiscate by power or cunning what is necessary to the life of the neighbour. Do not steal, do not commit adultery, do not covet, cheat, lie. These commands set limits that require each person to conduct themselves as a responsible member of the community. This sets limits to protect people and their property. It was designed to stop the powerful pharaohs coming along and leaving you destitute.

Coveting is not a word that we use much today. Yet the concept of wanting what is not ours to have is well known. Listen to some of these popular sayings:

*The closest to perfection a person comes is when they fill out a job application.*

*The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.*

*People live in two tents: content and discontent.*

*However long you take agonizing over the menu deciding which sweet to have, when the next person’s dessert arrives, you realise you made the wrong choice.*

*Our yearnings will always exceed our earnings.*

Whether it is desserts, clothes, houses, salaries, talents, lifestyles or cars, we want what other people have.

We all have different desires. It would be a boring world if we all had the same tastes. Not all desire is wrong of course. Some of our deepest desires are for good things: pleasure, joy, happiness, security, adventure, justice, peace. We want to be well respected, loved, and significant, to have meaning in our lives. We also want to get on in life and be ambitious. How we do that is always the good question.

Thirdly special mention must be made of the fourth commandment on Sabbath where we find at the core of creation the invitation tom rest. In the version ion Deuteronomy (5.12-15) this command is rooted in the Exodus memory and concerns rest for the slaves. Here it is connected to the order of creation. It looks backwards and imagines God on the seventh day either spent and needing to rest, thus vulnerable, or so serenely situated in creation that God was able to be at ease. Either way, the conduct of God on the seventh day is in sharp contrast to the world of Pharaoh, in which there is no rest but only feverish productivity. Work, work, work you slaves! The command is about respecting life and putting limits on production and consumption. It was a call to rest but also to rest in the presence of God – this is a holy day – to find your peace and security in the love of God and not in feverish activity.

*Walter Brueggemann says this: ‘The ten commandments are a crucial line of defence against the destructive nihilism in the world. Nihilism, the conviction that there are no reliable values, no absolutes results not in freedom but in the brickyard of Pharaoh where human life is completely exploitable, a deep and earthly disorder that is located not far from the ovens of Auschwitz. The god who commands knows very well what the exploitative commands of pharaoh will yield, and knows as well an alternative set of commands that authorize another way in the world. And it is to these alternative commands that Israel assents.’*

As I said earlier, these commandments might have been ten words, a kind of shorthand for guidance handed down from generation to generation. What has been translated in to English as ‘you shall not’ could also mean ‘you will not’ in the original Hebrew Text. This opens up the possibility of seeing that one day, if all are living in a right relationship with God, there will not be murder, or stealing and so on.

In giving the Ten Commandments God invites us to choose to do things that will make the world a better place – free from exploitation and corruption. The Ten Commandments can become a vision of where we are heading in Christ. 'You shall not' comes with an authoritarian tone. ‘You will not’ suggests how through a developing relationship our personalities and lives are moulded into the purposes and ways of God.