

Address from David James for the Third Sunday of Lent

Well, here we are, half way through the season of Lent. Only half way, I hear you say! How long, O Lord, how long! How is it going? Are you finding it a helpful time? I do hope so. For me, I think one of the important opportunities that Lent offers is the chance to pause each year and get a better perspective on where we are and how we are with others and with God. And I think the readings we've just heard help us to do that, oddly perhaps, by reminding us just how different God is from us.

That may seem a strange thing to say because in one sense it's obvious. God is almighty; we aren't. God is immortal; we aren't. God is present everywhere but we have difficulty in just being present where we are. God is all-loving; we aren't. Christians perhaps more than others risk domesticating God - 'What a friend we have in Jesus', says the old hymn. True, but Jesus is not actually like our other friends - and that's why I want to suggest he's our best friend in fact; because it enables him to do what humans can't - but what we need.

The first of the readings today, the version of the Ten Commandments found in Exodus 20, took me back to those days when every celebration of the Eucharist, or Holy Communion, from the BCP included a recitation of all those commands, each one followed by the response, 'Lord, have mercy upon us and incline our hearts to keep this law.'

Many churches had and some still do, all those commandments written up on the wall behind the altar or else framed in the shape of two stone tablets on either side. This was often the only decoration to be seen; the rest was whitewash, occasionally relieved by stained glass. So you couldn't miss them. The sense that Christian faith was essentially about obedience to an austere moral law - and that you jolly well ought to behave yourself - subtly permeated the whole religious mindset.

The God of the Commandments is awesome, a God who tolerates no rivals, a God to treat with respect. And yet, of course, a God who also wants a relationship, a God who shows mercy and love to those who keep the commandments which are the terms of that relationship. A God who wants us to live harmoniously with others.

What God is doing in the Ten Commandments, though it's less obvious to us now, is in fact creating a new people, a new community of faith who would be defined by their behaviour. And that, in turn, was a reflection of their new relationship with the only true and living God. God was clearing the ground and doing a new thing.

Until Moses brought the Ten Commandments down from Mount Sinai, the Israelites were simply another Middle Eastern tribe. They were not consciously God's people. But through the experience of the Exodus and freedom from slavery the special relationship with God that had begun with Abraham and the patriarchs was forged

through the commandments for the whole community. Through their reflection of God's character they were to become a light for all nations.

Let's turn now to the gospel. This is John's account of the cleansing of the Temple. Jesus, in a fury we don't often associate with him, overturns the stalls of the traders around the outside of that huge building where people could exchange money for the currency or animals needed to fulfil the sacrificial laws for cleansing or forgiveness, once inside the sacred precincts themselves. God is clearing the ground again; in Jesus God is doing a new thing and forming a new people through his Son.

This is often seen as a prophetic sign of Jesus indicating that he has come to replace that whole system which had turned faith into a religious transaction - offer the right sacrifices and God in return will forgive us and cleanse us. But Jesus is coming to sweep all of that away. In future he will be the way to God, he will forgive us and cleanse us so we can start afresh. There's no transaction, it's free, it's undeserved. It's a gracious act offered out of sheer love for us, nothing less.

In all the other 3 gospels this incident comes just before Jesus is arrested and put to death, as if it was part of the provocation that the authorities reacted to because it was too threatening. It undermined the whole system. It deprived the religious authorities of control - and income.

But in John's gospel we find it right at the beginning. Why I wonder? I think it's because it sets the scene for what's to follow in the rest of John's account. It's a sign of who Jesus is and what he's come to do. The rest of the story simply shows the truth of it. He will himself eventually become the sacrificial victim, the Lamb of God who, in this gospel, will be offered up on a cross at exactly the same time as the lambs for Passover will be sacrificed in the temple. His death will bring forgiveness and cleansing to all who trust him.

Sometimes things happen which shake us up and upset our equanimity, our regular pattern of living. We've been living through just such a time this past year. I've been reminded of the fragility of the world I've taken for granted ever since I was young; a world of progress, of opportunity, of peace and freedom to act and move about and meet new people and do new things. I've been reminded sharply of my mortality and that of others whom I love. Some have not just been reminded of course, but have lived it and some have not survived.

One who did get through it, though, is the celebrity chef, Raymond Blanc who caught Covid before Christmas and spent a month desperately ill in hospital. It was devastating for him and his family but, he says, 'It turned out to be one of the greatest lessons of my life... I feel rich, much richer, because I now realise how precious and

sacred life is. I will be a stronger, kinder, better man in the future, not straightaway - it may take some time - but I am working at it.'

One of the things that may have happened for us as a society as a result of this pandemic is that, as for Raymond Blanc, some of the many things we have been doing have actually not been life-giving but life-draining for us. Maybe for all of us this enforced time of inaction with more time to notice the world around us and the importance to us of our human relationships and the communities we belong to, will be a time of future renewal, getting back to the essentials of what it is to be human. It feels a very Lenten experience.

I wonder if sometimes that's what it takes to open our eyes to the wonder and reality of the amazing grace of God's presence and care for us. But here's the thing. In those circumstances what we need as people is not just a good friend. We need someone who knows us and loves us personally, like a friend, certainly, but also one who has the power to change things and open up new possibilities for a better future. We need a friend like Jesus, but also a God like him too. We need the one who is beyond us and other than us to enable good things to be drawn from bad ones. We need a friend to be with us but also a redeemer to transform us.

Offering his thoughts during the first pandemic lockdown, a previous Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, says this in a little talk entitled "We are not God": 'The only way to eternal life ... is, as we read in the Gospel of John, knowing the true God and Jesus whom he has sent: the true God who alone can tell us we are not God, and yet are the infinitely precious and diverse children of God, called to receive gifts without limit and to receive them with and for one another in the unthinkably odd community of the Church.' (*Candles in the Dark* p32)

In this strange Lenten time let's pray that we may become ever more aware of the Beyond in our Midst who both loves and leads us to a new and better way of living.

Conclusion

We are returning to holding our main services in church in this coming week, both the midweek and Sunday Communion services. The arrangements in church will be as before but at the moment only three singers are allowed which will restrict the music we can offer. But it will be good to be in church again for Mothering Sunday. If you are able to come please avoid casual chatting in church or mingling before and after the service. It is best if conversations can be held outside so that any possibility of contagion is minimised. We will also continue to stream the Sunday Service from St David's and the Wednesday Mass from St Michael's among other online services.