

Hinde Street Methodist Church
Sunday 7 March 2021
11.00am David Thompson

Third Sunday of Lent: The Ten Words as sources of Freedom

Our History books tell us that our countries' churches were once decorated with fabulous drawings of saints, prophets and Christ himself. However, during the Reformation these were defaced and whitewashed, and in many cases, they would have the ten commandments painted over them.

Many have remained and the tradition continued during the mass building of churches in the 19th century, where the ten commandments would often be painted above the altar. I know there are some people who find this somewhat imposing.

When I was in my late teens and early 20s, I used to love going to music festivals. Nothing could beat the euphoria you would feel being part of a 50,000 crowd, with the sun going down, your friends by your side, listening to your favourite band bellow out that tune that had been the soundtrack to those in between years. The pinnacle of these festivals is Glastonbury. On my last visit to Glastonbury in 2011, on the Monday morning, as I looked upon a muddy field, with five days' worth of rubbish and abandoned tents, otherwise forgotten about, whilst reading the programme of the festival, I came across a quotation from the late Tony Benn about Britain's largest music festival: "Glastonbury is a great example of how anarchy can work." Turning back to the scene of chaos that was before me, I couldn't help but disagree.

Like those who find the ten commandments painted on our church walls imposing, there is often a tendency in our society to look at law and rules as constraining rather than liberating. We quite rightly look at the tyrannical states around our world as examples where laws are established/or ignored that oppress a minority and we may even look on our own past, and see how laws prevented us from even carrying out the most basic of rights. Tomorrow is international women's day, a day in which we remember the sacrifices that were and continue to be made by people across our world for gender equality. We may note that laws have often kept this back from being reality.

However, it is my view that when established in the right way, laws can have the opposite effect. Rather than constrict, they can in fact liberate, and allow us to flourish. Laws, rules and even commandments are essential to freedom.

One of my favourite things I like to go and do when I visit my parents in Lincoln is go and see the Magna Carta. Written in 1215 by the Barons in the reign of King John, the Magna Carta is seen as the birth of the freedom and liberties that we enjoy in Britain today. It wasn't successful by any means, King John rejected it within a year, but the limits it called for, on the King, paved the way for the Bill of Rights, universal suffrage and even the UN declaration of Human Rights. Equally, as a teacher, I always remind my pupils that the school rules are there for us to flourish in our learning.

Pope Francis, at the start of his papacy said this of the Ten Commandments: "The Ten Commandments are not a limitation, but an indication for freedom."

Born out of the freedom of the Israelites, they were not given by God to constrain the Israelites but allow them to flourish as covenantal people.

These Ten Commandments or 'Words' as the Hebrew *debarim* means, are given at an important point in God's people's story. The Israelites have been freed from their 400-year slavery, thus fulfilling the promise that God gave Moses and to his people.

It is well documented that those living in slavery in the Americas and the Caribbean saw the Exodus story as an inspiration for the freedom that they longed for-that God was on the side of the oppressed. Likewise, in 1960s Latin America, the Liberation theologians did the same, as they identified with the oppressed poor and used the Exodus as their benchmark.

The Israelites are the descendants of Abraham, and as we heard in our readings last week, they are blessed with a covenant-a relationship with God. In verse 19 in Exodus, we read: Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.

In short, the words that are given to Moses by God for the Israelites are essential to embracing the covenant, for through their following, we enter a relationship with God.

What, then, of these words/these commandments? They are born out of freedom from slavery. God reminds Moses of this when he says in verse two "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of slavery..." It is therefore no accident that these words are given to the people at the beginning of their freedom, for with freedom comes responsibility.

The Ten Words indicate that responsibility is one of duty. **Duty to God and Duty to each other.**

Through our **duty to God**, shown through the first four words, they act as a reminder to always remember that God is our source, our strength and our redeemer and what is clear, given the context of when these words were given, God is a God that wants to be free and flourish.

However, we are fallen, so we need guidance, we cannot do it on our own, we need laws to obey that keeps us in relationship with God and allows for us to flourish. They are signposts to our freedom that keep us on our journey of faith.

Essential to our relationship with him, is how we respond to one another, so the other six commandments, outline our **duties to others**. With freedom comes responsibility to one another. These are not individualistic ethics, but communal. For in order to enter into a relationship with God, as is our covenantal call, we must recognise the other, not as some slave to be abused in the pursuit of our own individual desires, but one that should be respected and cared for. It is, therefore, no accident that our duties to God and our duties to each other come through in the same verses, for they are one of the same. We can only enjoy a relationship with God, if we are to respect and care for one another.

As Christians, there has often been a tendency to ignore the important role that the Ten Commandments play in indicating our freedom. Like we do in society with the laws that we see as restricting our freedoms, we champion Jesus as someone who turned his back on laws. For example, we may focus on his criticisms of the pharisees as ardent of the law but ignore the first few words of the Sermon on the Mount, when he says that he has come to fulfil the law does not to replace it. I believe our Gospel reading this morning shows Jesus' frustration at those who are not willing to take the law seriously. He lashes out at those who have failed to recognise their duty to God and instead brought their material needs into the House of God.

In response to this, I cannot help but think about the events in the United States in January, when a mob descended on the capitol building, as a President failed to condemn them. For the many who opposed this, it symbolised an attack on democracy, the constitution and a

nation. In response, the inauguration of Joe Biden a week later, encompassed the notion in democracy that no individual is greater than a nation. When we ignore laws, for the benefit of our individual selves, not only do we turn our back on history, but we turn our back on a calling from God to be covenantal people.

Returning then to the image of the ten commandments on the walls of our churches. It may have been the intention of those who commissioned them to be imposing, to be authoritarian and even restrictive, but given the context of where these words come from—out of slavery and into freedom, they do the opposite. They allow us to flourish as we seek to live out our call as covenantal people. I am reminded, therefore, of Jesus' words in John 15: 1 "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." And what has he just done just a few moments before? Well he has washed his disciple's feet.

God calls us as free people into a relationship with him through his law that is fulfilled in his Son Jesus Christ. This is not to be achieved by own individual merit, but by embracing, serving and responding to each other. This is brought into reality through the calling from God to obey his commandments. In the words of Pope Francis, therefore, ***"The Ten Commandments are not a limitation, but an indication for freedom."***

This is the good news.

Amen.