

# St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

## EXODUS - COMMANDMENTS

10<sup>th</sup> June 2018

Exodus 20:1-17

Mark 12:28-34

The ten commandments are one of the bits of the Bible, one of the few bits, which “everyone” thinks that they know, or that they ought to know, although few people, if asked, can actually remember all ten of them. Of course, in older churches they were often written on the walls, sometimes of plaques set each side of the pulpit. I think it says a lot about the austerity of our Presbyterian faith that it was the ten commandments which were so displayed, half of which are negatives, things forbidden, and not the two commandments which Jesus said were the greatest, both of which are positive, things to be done. Do we find it easier to forbid each other things, than to affirm the power of love to transform life?

The ten commandments, which were the basis of all the multi-faceted Jewish law which was to follow, were given to the people of Israel not long after they had left Egypt and begun their wilderness travels. They had crossed the sea of reeds, they had been given the manna that was to feed them and water from a rock, and they had defeated the Amalekites in a battle. Each of these things they knew had been given them by God: the manna, which was so strange and miraculous that its name really means “what is it?”; the water, where no water was before; and the victory, given because Moses held up his hands in prayer during the fighting. So, they knew that God was with them; they had seen what he did for them and gave to them. Now he would tell them what he wanted from them.

And really, it could all be summed up by the first of these commandments. God wanted the people to recognise that there is no other God and treat him accordingly. Ancient people would often trade off one so-called god against another, flitting from this one to that one if they couldn't get what they wanted. “You shall have no other God” puts an end to that. It puts an end to thinking of God as a being whose purpose is just to give what we want. It puts an end to human self-centeredness in relation to faith. You shall have no other God means that you will treat the one and true God as God, as the source of all power and life and blessing and righteousness. You will give undivided attention to that One God. In fact, as it was later said, and as Jesus quoted, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and with all your strength.”

The rest of the commandments flow from this first one, because, as St. Augustine once said, “Love God and do what you please.” If you take God seriously, then you will want all of your life to be lived in his way. You will refuse to make images of God – knowing that you can never come close to representing God, and that anyway, God's image is already given us in every human being, made in the image of God. You will not want to dishonour God's name if it is precious to you. You will want to keep a day of rest, in which to honour God. You will want to honour the parents God gave you, you will not want to kill anyone made in God's image, you will be content with what God gives and not prone to adultery, theft or covetousness, and you

knowing that the One God watches you, you will be truthful in your words and your silences. It all flows from knowing that there is one God and worshipping with the whole of life.

It's a lovely theory, isn't it? So, how do you do with it? If you have known the ten commandments and the two great commandments from childhood, how are you doing at living by them? Are you getting pretty good at it by now? There is more to living in service and worship of God than knowing the right words.

The people of Israel were to discover that. They were given these commandments early on in their wilderness sojourn, but when they came to the edge of the promised land, as we read last week, they had not developed enough faith to take the risk of going forward. They knew the words, but they had not let them sink deep into their hearts so that they became part of their instinctive way of thinking about the world. When the crunch came, they did not react as people of faith. So back to the wilderness they had to go.

What do you say when you're squeezed? We thought about that with the children, and it is one of my favourite children's talks to do, because it is such fun to squeeze our cuddly Kiwi (Mr Peck) and hear it sound. But it is a real question. When you are squeezed, how do you react? When you have bad news, or when someone gets your goat, or when the government does not do what you think they ought, or when you are tired, or when you are sad or when – well, fill in your own squeezing kind of blanks. What do you say when you are squeezed? How do you act and react? Does your faith come out instinctively, or does the mindset of the world in which we live show itself more strongly? Is your faith, is our faith together as a church, more than knowing the right words?

What you say, and do, when you are squeezed, shows what is most deeply rooted inside you. If you flare up in anger, that says something. If you hide away and hope no one sees you, that says something. If you try to get your own back on the person or institution which you perceive to be the source of your problem, that says something. As Christians, we should have, we want to have love for God and love for others in God's name rooted at the centre of our being. How can you plant that? How can you tend that once it is planted, so that it can grow deep roots and thrive in the soil of your life?

When Jesus was in discussion with the scribe, he quoted scripture. Indeed, this was the closing part of a longer discussion about scripture which Jesus had with a variety of religious professionals. They had argued about the peripherals of faith; about how faith in God related to civic obedience – should they pay taxes or not? And about the marital rights of the dead, though that was a screen for a bigger question about the resurrection. But these are not the central issue of faith. Jesus' opponents knew that as well as he did. So, when he was given a chance, given a cue, Jesus cut straight to the heart of the matter, and the scribe had to agree with him. He had to agree that loving God and loving people made in God's image, is what everything else is about, and so is more important than the whole religious system in which he was trained. And Jesus said he was not far from the kingdom of God.

We also have a religious system in which we are trained, formally or by use and expectation. And just as the Jewish system was not, when properly applied a bad system, in that it could keep God at the front of people's minds, so our system is not bad either. It has its merits. It has been used to bring many people to faith and nurture many people in faith, so that their faith grew strong. But the system is not

what the faith is about. The system might be thought of as the courts of the church, General Assembly, Presbyteries and Kirk Sessions, or the system might be thought of as the weekly pattern of worship we are used to, with hymns and prayers, readings and sermon. But the system is not the core of our faith. If we are squeezed, the system will not sustain us, and spouting it and clinging to it, will not be a sufficient response.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. Love your neighbour as yourself. When you are squeezed, does love come out? It can only come out, if you have put it in, or rather, if you have allowed God to put it in there. There is no shortcut to this than spending time with God, reading the Bible and praying, humbly, simply, praying for ourselves and praying for others. I know that many of you do this, which is why very often when you are squeezed, the love does come out!

But it is not a thing you can ever have done enough of, or a process that has an end that you can reach. There is not going to come the day when you will say "Well, that's that, I have been all filled up with God's love, so that there is no room for any more." Because the point of being filled with the love of God and with love for God, is so that we can leak it out all day every day wherever we are, like a saturated sponge. And in fact the more that you give God the chance to fill your life with his love, the more you will want to, and know that you need to.

The challenges and changes which the church is facing is a real squeeze for most of us. It certainly is for me. Are we going to react as people of faith, or people with a system? The first and best way we can cope, can be inspired, can find our direction, is to spend time with God, loving him and allowing him to fill us with his love for others.

When the 10 commandments were written on Church walls, the message given, intentionally or not, was that the church is about keeping the rules, watching your step, curbing your evil instincts. Jesus said that if we seek to actively love God and others, the changes in our lives that the rules sought to impose from outside will happen from within. God grant that we seek to love him more and more each day. Amen.

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