

Exodus 20:1-20 Matthew 21:33-46

At the beginning of last month, June & I were on holiday in our touring caravan. One of the sites we stayed at had the following set of rules.

Please keep your dogs on a lead at all times.

Barbecues are permitted but must be raised off the ground.

No fires or generators.

We expect the site to be quiet between 10pm & 8am.

There is a 5 mph speed limit.

We expect you to be courteous to each other and show consideration to those around you.

Whilst the set of rules did tell us something of how we should behave, they didn't tell us how to enjoy ourselves, that was up to us to make every effort to make the most of our stay using the set of rules as a guide as to how we should behave.

If we failed to keep to all the rules then we would probably have been asked to leave and our pitch would have been given to someone else who would be willing to abide by the rules.

In the Church of England marriage ceremony there are vows to be taken, promises to be made. When I married June, I promised to forsake all others, I promised to be faithful to her, (she says I promised to say sorry and yes dear, but I don't remember that bit!), never the less I made these promises until death will separate us. These vows are essential guidelines, which are necessary if the marriage is to succeed. But once again these rules don't tell you how to make the marriage work, it's up to the couple involved to make a right relationship with one another, so that along with the vows taken a successful marriage will follow.

It's much the same with the Ten Commandments; they were never designed as a set of stand-alone rules. There is another aspect to them as they describe what living up to a certain set of values and identity looks like.

In Judaism they are not called the Ten Commandments. The Hebrew term is aseret hadevarim, which literally means 'ten utterances' or 'ten statements' because they were rooted in things that are meant to be in God's kingdom.

They say something of who we are meant to be.

We sometimes read them as 'this is what you have to do or do not do',

but there is more to it than that, God is saying 'this is who you are', that's why when we do break one or more of the Ten Commandments, we also break ourselves.

It's interesting to note that when Moses met with God on Mount Sinai, as described in chapter 19 of Exodus, we are told that the people of Israel 'stood at the foot of the mountain' and to this day, in Judaism, people will stand for the reading of the Ten Commandments.

At the time these commandments were given to Israel, they had just been freed from slavery, which kind of brings up the following questions;

Had they just traded one set of rules with Pharaoh with another set of rules from God?

Did they feel like freed people?

And when we bind ourselves to God through such a code of morality, perhaps sometimes going against our own opinions, do we lose freedom, or do we gain freedom?

Personally I know that my soul needs freedom and I believe that freedom can be found working to the rules and building up a right relationship with God.

If I don't then my life could end up like an octopus on roller skates, I'm moving but I'm not sure what direction I'm going in!

So what are the results of not obeying these Ten Commandments?

Well actions have consequences.

Is this something of what Jesus is saying in our Gospel reading?

Here we find Jesus in and around the courtyard of the Temple of Jerusalem.

Typical of the lectionary, the reading starts with Jesus words 'listen to another parable', clearly stating that this is Jesus second attempt to put the message across.

I do sometimes wonder that if Jesus was fully human, then not only did He share the feelings of our pain and our sorrow, our laughter and our joy, but also our frustrations too.

For me it brings about the question, what sort of tone of voice did He have as He addresses these Temple authorities?

Was it one of frustration as He drives home the point of the parable?

Or was He calm and collective as He leads these Temple authorities, these chief priests and Pharisees straight into a trap?

It can be an interesting exercise to take a piece of scripture like this and place yourself on both sides.

What tone of voice would use if you were in Jesus shoes, or should I say sandals?

How would you feel if you were on the receiving end of Jesus words?

Whichever way you look at it, this is not the gentle meek and mild Jesus we so often hear about, this is the 'have a go' Jesus, this is Jesus as they say 'telling them how it is, like it or not!'

This parable is so full of analogies, the first part telling us of a landowner, God, who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a hole for the winepress, and built a watchtower, or in other words, creation (what God made). Then he let out the vineyard to tenants, He gifted what he made to mankind.

The next part of the parable tells us what happens when the landowner sent his servants; 'they beat one, killed another and stoned another'.

At this point Jesus is probably referring to the prophets, or those who were 'models of Jesus in scripture'. For example, in the Genesis Joseph was thrown in a well and then sold into slavery. The prophet Jeremiah was imprisoned, Daniel was thrown into a furnace and later a lion's den, and Zechariah was stoned.

Jesus then pushes things even further with this thinly veiled parable as he describes what happens when the landowner sends his son.

It doesn't say the landowner sent one of his sons, it clearly states that there is only one son, echoes of John 3 verse 16, 'for God (the landowner) so loved the world (what God made), that He sent His one and only son'.

As Jesus describes what happened to the landowner's son, that he was grabbed, thrown out of the vineyard and killed, he is anticipating His own rejection and death.

He's using this parable to let the Temple authorities, these chief priests and Pharisees know that they have already rejected his message.

That's assuming they were going to accept Jesus words anyway, after all He's a Northerner, from Galilee, a man of mean education, and as far as they are concerned what does He know!

They couldn't be further from the truth.

Jesus is about to lead the authorities into a verbal trap as He poses the question; ‘Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?’

You can almost hear how proud these Temple authorities are as they give their answer; ‘he will certainly kill those evil men, and rent the vineyard to other tenants’

And Jesus response? You don’t get it do you, you’re supposed to know be so clever, know everything, ‘haven’t you read the Scriptures’

‘The stone which the builders rejected as worthless, turned out to be the most important of all’ ‘and so I tell you, the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce the proper fruits’.

Jesus has just delivered the punchline!

Probably the hardest saying ever spoken by Jesus in the Gospels as He spells out in very simple terms what will happen.

There is no middle ground, no room for negotiation, the outcome is quite clear.

Ouch!!

The penny has finally dropped, now these Temple authorities know that this parable was about them. To say they are not happy is something of an understatement. They don’t want this to go any further, they want to arrest Jesus, but as it says, ‘they were afraid of the crowds, who considered Jesus to be a prophet’.

They were afraid of the crowds and they feared for their own safety!

They feared for their own future!

Not a good place to be!

As I said earlier, actions have consequences.

So what does this mean for us some 2000 or so, years later?

Is this something of a warning for us?

Do we need to live in fear of God?

At the end of our first reading, Moses gives a reply to that very question.

‘Don’t be afraid; God has only come to test you and make you keep on obeying him, so that you will not sin’

When we were on that caravan site, if we hadn’t obeyed the rules, we would have had to leave and our pitch and it would have given to someone else. Someone, who was willing to obey those rules and thus enjoy the benefits of such obedience.

In the same way, we have been gifted with this created world and the creator gave His one and only Son, for you and for me.

Quite simply, there is no middle ground, as it was for those Temple authorities, so it is for us and for our fellow human beings, there is living by God’s commandments and being identified as His, there is acceptance of Jesus and the benefits He brings or there is rejection.

Actions have consequences.

May God bless us all.

Peter Igo 5.10.14