

SERMON FOR LENT 3 | 04.03.2018

For a Church that has the Ten Commandments as the major feature on the east wall, we pay very little attention to them! Most of us would struggle to remember them accurately and the invitation to use them as part of our Masses in Lent has not been very popular - although I know they are still there in Fr Evan's booklets.

I wonder why the Ten Commandments don't resonate with us that much? Are we, as some suggest, increasingly 'rule-averse'; we really don't like being told what to do? Those who are otherwise skeptical about faith would say that the Ten Commandments are the greatest contribution made by the Judeo-Christian tradition as they provide the moral and ethical framework for all people of goodwill. You don't have to believe that God carved them on tablets of stone to value them as the basis for community living.

Perhaps the answer lies in contemporary postmodernism where the general rule is that one can do pretty much whatever one wants – so long as it doesn't hurt other people. The bottom line is the legal one: the law stands to protect the weak and the vulnerable from abuse – but after that you can choose what you like. No one will have been in the least bit surprised to read this week that the numbers currently getting married are the lowest they have ever been.

So the story of Jesus tearing into the Temple in Jerusalem, whip cord in hand, angrier than we have seen him at any point in the Gospels, is bound to make us wonder: what was it about the situation there that upset him so much?

Because there is something quite 'staged' about this episode. It is so very different from that wonderful encounter with the crowd who are on the point of stoning a girl to death. Having shown them up for the hypocrites they were, he turns to her and says quietly: *Go away and sin no more.*

So what is the significance of this dramatic event?

I suspect you are still imagining today's cleansing of the Temple as the one Matthew, Mark and Luke talk about as having taken place on Palm Sunday. But look again: this is Chapter 2 of St John, right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry and not at the end at all. In fact the only event that comes before it is the private wedding in Cana when he turns water into wine.

In St John's version of the Gospel story, instead of Jesus starting with calling the disciples from their boats we get a major confrontation with the Pharisees. And the meaning of the Temple event is different from the one being made by the other Gospel writers too. Their telling of the story focuses on the corruption and dishonesty of the traders. In John, the issue is not about immorality but about who Jesus is: *Stop making my Father's house a market-place* he bellows.

And in one short sentence he has laid out his pitch: *I am the Son of God – and as such I lay claim to this building and require that it be respected as the Temple of all holiness, the special place where God lives among his people.* And for those who know the reference, here is Jesus using the psalms to identify himself with God's faithful ones – pointing to later events in which he, like they, would be innocently killed. Here is Jesus clearly identifying himself with Isaiah's 'suffering servant', the one who would suffer unjustly.

For a good number of years, I have been wrestling with these words in the Eucharistic Prayer: *Drink this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins...* QUI PRO VOBIS ET PRO MULTIS EFFUNDÉTUR IN REMISSIÓNEM PECCATÓRUM.

But is this the right translation? If Jesus is less concerned with people's morality (the Ten Commandments) than he is with their willingness to share in the work of the suffering servant, shouldn't those words of institution reflect that more accurately? So, some scholars suggest, what Jesus would have actually said was, *this is my blood which is shed for you and for all* ET PRO OMNIBUS VOBIS...

And it is an argument I find pretty compelling. Jesus was about holiness – searching out for the wounded, the poor and the lost not about ethical rule-keeping. *How often should you forgive someone: seven times? No, seventy times seven.* Just as we ourselves hope to be forgiven, and forgiven again. *Go away, sin no more.*

Looking for some materials for this morning's 10am All Age 'hands-on' Mass on the theme of Lent, I came across this. In my copy it was unnamed and it was only by Googling it that I found it had been written by my old Principal at St John's College in Durham, Dr Ruth Etchells. It is called 'The Judas Tree' and reflects on the terrible part Judas played in Jesus' Passion.

And after you hear it, ask yourself whether the words 'for many' or 'for all' seem right to you...

In Hell there grew a Judas Tree
where Judas hanged and died
because he could not bear to see
his Master crucified.

Our Lord descended into Hell
and found his Judas there
for ever hanging on the tree
grown from his own despair.

So Jesus cut his Judas down
and took him in his arms
'It was for you I came' he said
'and not to do you harm.

My Father gave me twelve good men
and all of them I kept
though one betrayed and one denied,
some fled and others slept.

In three days time I must return
to make the others glad
but first I had to come to Hell
and share the death you had.

My tree will grow in place of yours,
its roots lie here as well.
There is no final victory
without this soul from Hell.'

So when we all condemn him
as of every traitor worst,
remember that of all his men
Our Lord forgave him first.

Or, in the words of our second reading from St Paul to the Corinthians: *For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*