

Reflection 4<sup>th</sup> October.

Today's text is pretty well known. The ten commandments. I feel pretty confident that I've actually preached with you a lot before on this passage but I can't find any evidence for that, so I apologise if I am in some way repeating myself. And- though I've been advised by a number of commentators to not EVER preach on the lot as a whole, that's just what we're doing today. Buckle in.

We don't read the 10 commandments as something that pertains to freedom I think, if we even read them at all. They read like a list of rules we remember from Sunday School, and the corners have been worn off over the years anyway, and we in the Christian church have long assumed that our focus should be on Jesus, not on this mean list of quite stuffy rules that seem only focussed on what we should not do. And so we forget about them, when we're not getting really uppity about them being displayed in public places that is.

The world around us often thinks of freedom as having the ability to do what we like when we like. And in some ways that's true- particularly for once oppressed persons who now can live the way they choose.

Women for instance, who were once considered property – something belonging to a neighbour, able to be coveted in our reading- who could not vote, who could not choose what to do with their bodies, for them the opportunity to work, own property, take birth control, wear what they want and vote in elections is the very definition of freedom.

But where are the limits to this definition? What is freedom, particularly when we all know that all of us doing what we want ends up with some of being a lot more free than others. When our freedom affects the freedom and the flourishing of others, this is where we've got to have a broader look at what freedom is.

And though not often equated with freedom, this passage can actually be viewed as a guide to living in liberty.

As you may have already experienced, the big ten, though quite famous, is actually not all that easy to bring to mind in its fulness. The list, which as I've mentioned people fight to have hung up in public places, which exists as some sort of quasi-justification for nations and political groups to convince themselves that they are founded on "traditional Christian values", is actually not all that well attended to, for all that attention. It is forgotten, pushed aside, ignored as irrelevant.

So let's sit with it for a second, on its own terms. And that means remembering that actually it's not necessarily a list as we have come to know it, it is offered as a part of a larger whole to a group of people who were already God's people, already bound to God and in a relationship with God.

I think if we spend some time with this passage, we will see that each of these rules, or commands, pertains to human flourishing. This is not about stricture or censure or control, as much as it's about a covenant people living in relationship to their God, and living well.

Because, your living well sometimes does depend on what I choose to do or not to do, and vice versa. The Israelites had been given long sought for freedom, yes. And the way this freedom was to be lived out, was to always have in mind the flourishing of your community, of the people around you.

The first commandment is the one that can paint God as a bit of a jealous lover. You shall not have any gods before me. Loudly God stakes God's claim over God's people. But the beginning of the text is actually performing a slightly different function. **I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;**

God is named as theirs, as the Lord who frees them and loves them. They are reminded first off who it is that is speaking to them. "The Lord YOUR God, the one who freed you" I am yours. Which is why the first commandment has to be 'you shall have no other Gods before me'. First of all, there were many other gods about at the time to choose from, worshipped by many other people. and second, this is an entering into a covenant relationship, it's a two way thing. God is saying- it has been well established that you are mine. I have to be yours as well.

The commands that follow are in a similar vein, and though we don't make graven images in the same way any more, it's pretty compelling to think of all the other things we hold up as gods, as well as what it is about Godself that we make an idol of. We see it's important to know who God is, to give oneself to God and to not confuse our loyalties with all the other things that will compete for them. and, we are reminded that even to name God is to take an enormous liberty. From there the commandments begin a swing in a quite different direction, though still one grounded in who God is; God rested on the 7<sup>th</sup> day, so we should rest too. Respect, devotion, love, and emulation, these are the things that should be given to God.

The rest of the commandments are more aligned with our behaviour toward one another, rather than our behaviour toward God, though obviously they are by nature intertwined.

It's interesting to note how many of the commandments a part of the cultural and indeed legal zeitgeist. Murder and theft are both punishable under law, adultery and lying are still considered wrongish in a general sense, and all of this makes sense. They all have fairly obvious negative consequences for others, and ourselves. But some commandments are not considered as seriously are they?

Certainly for *some* honour your father and mother may have been a tenet that they were raised by, some might consider it as foundational to those family values we're all supposed to aspire to, but for others it's difficult to reconcile, irrelevant, or impossible. Certainly when I have had difficulties with my own father, I have not felt the compulsion to obey this one as strongly as I would the ones about taking a life for instance.

Do not covet is referred to by Marilynne Robinson as the unenforceable commandment. She says it is constantly violated, and I would agree. Very easy to forget about and just wildly easy to engage in, do not covet I would say is the hardest commandment to stick to.

And, the sabbath! What is that doing in there? How can a holiday once a week be as important as not killing someone? I think it is possible that we in the church- certainly those in leadership in the church- would find this commandment the hardest. Isn't that silly? And isn't it strange that this is in the same list as all those other things that are so obviously important, so vital to ordered human life, but we still ignore it?

It's so easy to wrap the keeping of the sabbath up with the old laws that we must ignore- after all we don't have a public sabbath any more, us ministers largely work on Sundays and though we are supposed to take a day off, so many of still consider it secretly a soft option. If you are here to serve surely a day off is a little too much, who needs a whole day! There is always something to be done. My mate Cath says that ministers should be taking two days off, one for laundry and one as a Sabbath. For so many of us, not just ministers, the notion of rest as something we are asked to do by our God is quickly hidden away, tucked behind the mountains of work we have to do, tasks we have to complete in order to feel as if we have lived up to the ideal we set for ourselves.

What this fluctuating, uneven interaction with and obedience to the commandments tells us is that these are more than rules, this list is about more than delineating the good from the bad, or knowing who is in and who is out.

If we look at these things through the lens of 'how bad the breaking of this is' we will sharpen some ends and forget others. If however we look at them through the lens of human flourishing, they tell us a different story.

They tell us a story about a people who see the sanctity of one another, who try and be satisfied with and grateful for what they have rather than constantly reaching out for what they want, who take seriously the idea that they must rest, enjoy their lives, take care of themselves. They are people who don't let anger or the desire to deceive get the better of them.

People who live under the loving gaze of Yahweh, and do all they do in honour of the God who liberates them.

There is, I think, liberation in simply knowing how to be who we are supposed to be. There is liberation in seeing the working out, practically of how to be people, in being given more than 'god is love' to walk through the world. We so often long for more direction, how do we actually live, now? and while these commandments were written for people in a very different time (who probably were longing for an answer to the question 'but how do we actually live, now?') (also, incidentally, the commandments I think weren't necessarily supposed to be an unshakable fact of a list, plastered on walls etc. it's possible they were meant to be a sort of living document that could be interpreted and perhaps altered as contexts changed. Fascinating), so while these were written to people a long time ago, we can hold them up to see how they speak to the heart of what god wants us to be. As a guide to living well, you can't do a lot better than these, as at least a starting point.

And more than this: I believe the point is that we orient ourselves to God- we face God and stand in awe and wonder in front of the liberating Divine, and this helps us be the kind of people outlined in this document. That I think is another reason our relating to God and speaking of God is placed where it is- it allows all the rest to flow on. This list could be as much a description, as it is a list of how-to's.

If you are pointed at God, you are less likely to kill and I think you are less likely to hate. If you are becoming the person God sees and knows, you are less likely to be glib and light-hearted about the way in which you speak about God, and more likely to want to embrace humility. If you are centred on God, you are less likely to lean on deception and envy, and you are less likely to want to.

These laws, rather than being loud insistences from a God who seeks to control his people with fear and structured living, are a kind of hopeful parameter, an ode to who you will be if you live in the freedom offered to God's people; if you name God and look to God.

If you are in this, as I am in this, says the Lord, if you are *mine*, you will know that it's not ever ok to take a life.

That it is beneath you to lie, your words should be full of the integrity I know you capable of, that your parents are sacred, as all people are sacred, as you yourself are sacred!

This list is so far from simply a list of necessary laws to keep God's people in line. They are designed to shape this community, to describe God's people as they are formed into the kingdom of God.

People freed to love one another wholeheartedly, removed from jealousy and the kinds of power struggles that keep some down while others thrive. Freed to free others. People given the liberty that ushers them into the presence of the Divine, and offers them when they are there, a new way of being in the world.

Amen.

A note- you will by now I hope, have heard the news I sent out earlier this week. If you haven't, I apologise. I am leaving at the end of the year, which is still as sad for me to report as it might be shocking for you to hear.

I want you to know I've had so many good times being your minister. It has been a true honour to lead you in worship, to break open the word and the bread with you, to talk and to listen and to sing and to pray. I in some ways wish it could be different, but the fact is that living here and being your minister is not sustainable for me. But your future will be bright, and full of hope, in no small part because you are a community of love and faithfulness, and because God is with you. I hope we get to worship in person together again before I leave. Either way I'll keep doing what I'm doing and being here if you need to chat.

Thank you for all you do. Thank you for welcoming me. Let's make the next 3 months some really good ones.