

Third Sunday in Lent Year B

The season of Lent is an overlay of the crisis moments in Jesus' ministry in Galilee and Jerusalem and the reasons behind the passion story. And for us, a mixture of reflection on that ministry as example: how are we to change in response?

Exod 20: 1-17

The Ten Commandments are presented here as part of the Sinai Covenant. Later in Exodus (20:22 – 23:19) we find what looks like an elaboration of these ten, but in fact it is an older code of law altogether, and it probably draws on a wider range of sources from the Ancient Near East. Chapter 20 contains the founding deposit of the Sinai Covenant.

We should be careful to avoid studying this as if it were a checklist for community or personal life – a series of tick-boxes. Underlying it is a vision of God that is vastly greater than, and entirely different from, the one we in the 21st century have inherited. One commentator has pointed to the baleful influence of the 19th century philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, who defined God as the projection of our best human values. To this “liberal” movement there came a “conservative” reaction, which reasserted the sovereignty of God but denied God any active role in human affairs. Both of these views are far removed from the picture of God that underlies these commands.

Here, God is not “user-friendly”. God is absolutely insistent that only God (Yahweh) is worthy of worship. In the context of these laws, that is not to be dismissed as mere exclusivism; it is the truth. The very idea of God contains the clear implication that there can be only one. No squabbling in heaven, no negotiation with the House of Representatives and the Senate to get a stimulus package through (as President Obama is doing as I write this).

And no argument on earth either! The implication of this body of material is that humanity is subject to constraints and principles that lie beyond the reach of reason, argument, negotiation or even protest.

In our modern world, however, where everything we “take in” has in fact been mediated by some human agency – government, religious movement, learned scientific society or whatever – this invites the question: how do we know which voice to heed? Is this text itself mediated, and therefore open to question, to human reflection and judgement? Or is it the dictated word of God? But that only shifts the question, for the text will require human judgement and wisdom as we try to apply it to human structures and technological possibilities that would have been inconceivable three-and-a-half millennia ago. So, whose judgement, whose wisdom?

Ps 19

This psalmist inhabits a world in which the absolute sovereignty of God is unquestioned. His (the psalmist's) task is to connect that proclamation with

reality as we know it. Look around you, to the heavens and the sparkling array of stars. Look around you at the awesome wonder of nature. There is the evidential foundation of faith.

In verses 7-11 we return to the world of God the Supreme Speaker, the one who speaks, and in doing so acts. Here is another foundation of faith – God’s love expressed in guidance.

In the face of this overwhelming body of experience, the psalmist is driven to examine himself, and ask: how can I maintain my own integrity in the presence of this awesome authority?

Epistle 1 Cor 1: 18-25

One of the characteristics of the first letter to Corinth is that Paul was dealing with some of Corinth’s “smart set” as well as its artisans and labourers. The smart set were used to playing logic games, convincing themselves that a particular course of action or way of looking at things was entirely reasonable, and therefore beyond question. Paul does not deny the usefulness of our human powers of reason, but he declares that such powers are not the overriding authority that the smart set imagines them to be. They have their place, and there are often situations in which they can be of incalculable service. But even these must concede ultimate authority to God. God’s way is not the way of the Greek philosophers, nor even of the Jewish dogmatists. God’s way – astonishing, baffling, outrageous, unaccountable – is the way of the cross.

Gospel John 2: 13-22

The other evangelists place this story at the very end of their account of Jesus’ life, as part of the rising tension of Holy Week. John sets it right at the beginning. Whereas the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark and Luke) begin by describing the gradually mounting disquiet over Jesus’ attractive preaching and astonishing powers of healing, his claim to forgive sins and his power over nature, John thrusts us immediately into the central, climactic dispute which is then the backdrop for all “the stories of Jesus we love to hear”.

Jesus challenges the temple as the ultimate sign of God’s presence among his people. Jesus challenges the law as the ultimate sign of God’s goodness. Jesus challenges the inscrutable powers of illness, both mental and physical, as well as the unpredictable and often threatening powers of nature. Jesus challenges the prevailing religious view of the causes of illness. Jesus’ ministry does not begin (for John) as an entertaining sideshow, which then “moves to the West End” for its final triumph. It begins as a provocative demonstration right in the centres of power, confronting and challenging, and going on to offer his vision – God’s vision – of what human individual and community life should be like.