

LENT 3B 15/3/09 SERMON

EXODUS 20:1-17 JN 2:13-22

The Ten Commandments. Everyone knows the name. It conjures up pictures of a long haired and long bearded man carrying two blocks of stone. They look a bit like tombstones and are covered in writing. The numbers are often in Roman numerals – a curious anachronism given that Moses lived many centuries before Roman influence spread.

Moses led a large group of people into the wilderness after they had escaped their time of servitude in Egypt. As slaves they had had to live by strict rules and now they were free but how were they going to relate to each other? Who was going to make the laws they would need and what authority would those laws have? Now they were free, they would not accept a penal authority. Then God gave his commandments to Moses. To start with God established his authority. God reminded the people that it was he, God, who had brought the people out of slavery. Then he gave the commandments – the basic laws for living as a society. Later, of course, the people developed many rules and regulations to cover specific cases. Just read Leviticus!

Every society needs laws and regulations to operate. Without them there is anarchy and that is truly frightening - it causes the society to self-destruct. So there is nothing remarkable about the commandments against killing, stealing and adultery. But look at the first four of the ten commandments. They are all about God and our relationship with God.

You shall have no other gods before me

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock or the alien resident in your towns.

We are asked to put God ahead of everything else in our lives. We have to respect God and not allow anything else to take a prior place. Once that may have been bronze models of an ox but now it may be sport or that special car or electronic gear. We can even find ourselves putting the institution of the church ahead of God.

It seems that something like that is what had happened in Jerusalem by the time of Jesus. The Temple was the heart of Israel's life and occupied a huge area of the city. It dominated not only because it was on a high point but also because of the way it was run. Despite earlier prophets telling the people that

God did not want sacrifices, sacrifices took place on a huge scale at the Temple. Animals like sheep and cattle were normal but poor people could sacrifice the cheaper doves. These animals had to be approved by the Temple authorities for sacrifice so there was a market of the live animals there in the forecourts of the Temple. At major festivals when many people came to Jerusalem to worship at the Temple, there were lots of animals available – it must have been like a sale yard and just as smelly. Now to buy an animal for sacrifice, Roman coins, the currency of normal commerce and of taxes were not allowed. Jewish coins had to be used. So there were money changers there. You see how it all snowballed. Imagine the number of Temple staff needed to control it!. In the end, this commerce could become more important than the actual worship.

We can also see that instead of the sacrifice of animals, Jesus would be the sacrificial lamb. The cleansing of the Temple took place at the time of the Passover, the festival which celebrated liberation, freedom and rescue from slavery when God liberated his people from Egypt. For centuries, the people had celebrated with animal sacrifice, now Jesus was giving a new meaning to the Passover festival.

Jesus told them to stop making the Temple a market place. Jesus also told them that they could destroy the Temple and in three days he would raise it up. Now that Temple had been being built for 46 years and involved much stonework. How could it possibly be built up again in three days? So the Gospel writer explained that Jesus had meant the temple of his body. In other words, stone buildings and all the administration were not the heart of the matter. What God wanted was worship. It didn't matter where it happened as long as people understood that God was God and that they put God's wishes ahead of all else.

As far back as the time of Moses, God had commanded that people should observe the Sabbath. People need time to rest, to worship and to have time with family and friends. Life is not meant to be frenetic all the time. One way of dealing with the Sabbath rule was strict observance. No reading ordinary books on Sunday, only religious books. No sport. No work. No gardening. No homework.

One New Year, a friend had to be home in bed before midnight because New Year's day was a Sunday. It put a dampener on the New Year's Eve party!

On the other hand, the lack of a Sabbath can also go to extremes. A few years ago I had some days at Binna Burra, a bushwalking lodge on the Lamington Plateau west of the Gold Coast. Also there at the time was a young family of father mother and toddler. Father worked for an overseas company but was on official holidays. Nevertheless, he had to keep in touch with head office overseas. So one day I was on the same walk and saw him try at every high point to get a signal on his mobile. The day was a problem for him as he failed to get a signal until our return to the lodge after some hours. He didn't wait to get into his cabin but from the drive way rang through to his company. When I asked why it was so urgent he replied that although

he was on holidays, his company expected daily contact. If he failed to deliver, he would lose his job. Where is the time for renewal, for reflection and for worship in a life like that?

It was interesting to read in a book on ethics for clergy, that finding some time to have a regular Sabbath was essential. It doesn't matter so much which day of the week it is as long as there is time for rejuvenation and for worship. Certainly it has become more difficult since shops stayed open all weekend and a culture developed that thought that the operation of commerce every day was right. Sport happens on Sundays. Even Christians stop off to buy some food or go to see a film or do something that requires other people to be at work. Should we? Or is it more important that we ensure that each person is allowed the time to take time for themselves no matter which day of the week?

Each of us finds renewal in different ways. For some it is walking, for some sitting and reflecting, for some gardening, for some listening to fine music. Maybe different ways work at different times. Whatever works for you, build it into your life.

Take time for yourself and for your families. Take time to seek God, to pray, to contemplate and to worship. Amen.