

Exodus 20:1–20

Today's reading picks up the story of the Hebrews' escape from Egypt, where they had been held as slaves. Moses, the leader appointed by God, takes delivery of the Ten Commandments as he is leading them through the wilderness of the Sinai region to God's land of promise.

The original form and Hebrew language in Exodus 20 suggest that the commandments first may have been simply a list of ten words – murder, idolatry, adultery, and so on. These words were shorthand for a rule of life to guide the people of Israel along their journey to becoming the nation that was promised to Abraham.

Before I left my college training for ministry I had to share with my tutor about my rule for life. It included things like how I would spend my money, how I would spend my time, what were the priorities for my life, how I would live out my Christian faith. It is a good exercise for anyone to do. They say that if you don't live by your priorities you live by the pressures on you.

Rules within relationships will be about agreeing the best way to live together well

The Ten Commandments summarize God's rule for life. In the first commandment (this is not a hobby or a past time – the first commandment) we are told to acknowledge God as God alone, and are called to honour our relationship with God. In the commandment regarding Sabbath, we are told to match the rhythm of our lives with God's own rhythm. In the remaining commandments, God's loving wisdom lays out how to live so that our relationships with other people reflect God's relationship with us.

Protestant theologian Martin Luther (1483–1546) taught that every negative in this list implies a positive. For example, "do not kill" implies "support the living." The commandments offer a vision of the world that God promises to bring to fulfilment. Indeed the Hebrew word for 'You shall not' could equally be translated as 'you will not' implying a change in desire and outlook as one's relationship with God changes from rebellion (no one tells me what to do) to friendship (please guide me and show me how to live well and abundantly).

Desire is the key. Relationship is the key. Rules without relationship will always be legalistic and lead to defiance.

There is the old joke about Moses coming back down the mountain and saying to the Israelites:

‘I’ve got some good news and some bad news. The good news is that I’ve managed to keep God down to Ten Commandments. The bad news is that adultery is still one of them’

When you mention the Ten Commandments many people have an image of God as being that stern white bearded old man –imposing draconian rules on a wayward humanity.

Sigmund Freud is regarded as the father of modern psychology. He saw God as an illusionary father figure trying to constrain our natural instincts. Most of his thinking has been developed beyond recognition; indeed some of his ideas have long since been dismissed as quite unreasonable, particularly his views about religion. But one feature was his rather arbitrary division of the personality into three layers. The first of these was the ego, really only the Latin word for ‘me’: this was the public face which we all present to the world. Beneath this was the ‘id’ – again Latin for ‘it’ this embraced the primitive person, with all his uncontrolled lusts and passions. But above was the superego, which tried to control our id – if you like our conscience. The true ego was therefore our personality which emerged from the conflicts between the id and the superego.

Freud went on to propose that the superego was an integral and natural part of our personality, that we were born with it, and that we all benefited from the presence of a force which would inhibit our wilder passions. He suggested that, since animals seemed able to resist mutual self-destruction, so man ought also to be able to do so. He noticed that man was just about the only species whose members were capable of killing each other. Now we seem to have to accept that this so-called conscience has to be learned, like so much else of what makes us truly human.

In a school or institution rules are a means of putting an ethical framework into place, the underlying principle should be that of consideration for and courtesy towards others: all rules have that as their aim – the protection of the weaker against the stronger, the inhibition of insensitive actions against others.

The financial markets move between lesser and greater regulation – firmer boundaries to curb dangerous greed and excess. We are learning that once again human nature

needs boundaries if we are to live responsibly and in consideration of all, especially the weak.

Boundaries, inhibitors, commands, rules are not sexy! Most people's reactions are to try to bend them. If the speed limit is 30 you drive at 40. If you tell your teenager they can't drink alcohol until they are 18 they are tempted at 16. Rules always seem a killjoy. We live in a culture that doesn't like to be told how to live our lives. We don't want the nanny state. Likewise we don't want the nanny God.

I remember some one on an Alpha Course telling me that the biggest obstacle to him signing up for faith was having someone tell him how to live his life. It is one of the big reasons why your children don't come to church – because theories of human development talk about the need to create your own identity separate from your parents and become independent – you don't want your parents telling you what to do – God is a projection of the ultimate super parent.

I was listening to a podcast by Justin Brierley 'The Surprising Rebirth of belief in God' a discussion between the renowned historian Tom Holland and Dr Peter Williams of Tyndale House Cambridge about the historicity of the gospels. Tom Holland said

'I think there is no one who's more culturally Christian than the atheist who says 'I don't need some Bronze Age sky fairy telling me how to behave, because I just know how to behave! I'm a good person! I don't need the Bible to tell me to care for the weak and the poor and the refugee!' manifesting the fact that they are the result of centuries worth of biblical weathering'

Tom Holland in his famous book Dominion also claims that human rights and western liberalism is grounded in the Christian faith without which such notions as 'human rights' are not supported: Who says we are of worth? Who says we are equals? Especially as the scientific view of nature is one of power and the survival of the fittest. (see also Tim Keller 'Making sense of God, Hodder 2016, ch 10)

The Ten Commandments give the impression of an authoritarian God. Certainly, many passages in the bible give that impression. But context is important.

The people of Israel are on their wilderness journey escaping from slavery and oppression in Egypt. In Exodus 19 we find them at the mountain of Sinai. The giving of the Ten Commandments becomes a sign of God's covenant with the people of Israel.

They are a practical outworking of God's intention for God's people to live whole and healthy lives.

The intention is to establish a social rule that contrasts to life under Pharaoh. So the first thing that is said is 'I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt out of the land of slavery'. What they hear next in the Ten Commandments are God's strategy for fending off a return to the pre-Exodus conditions of exploitation and brutality within the community. The commandments are policies intended to create a society that practices God's justice instead of Pharaoh's injustice, and to establish neighbourly well-being instead of coercion, fear, and exploitation.

What policies were indispensable to prevent a return to pre-Exodus exploitation? You could consider all ten of these commandments but there are three broad themes. The first three commandments assert that there is only one God, who cannot be recruited or used for any social or human agenda.

When we make what is not god, God – things start to go wrong. Nationalism, materialism, success, status, are often quoted as the idols of our time. When we make what is not god God we lose perspective and we become enslaved to gods that have not got our best interest first. Money of course is the biggest idol of our time and this god causes no amount of anxiety and chaos and misery. It needs cutting down to size to ensure that it serves the interests of society and not the other way round

The second set of commandments concern human social relationships. They seek to make human community possible by setting limits to the acquisitive capacity of members of the community – the capacity to seize and confiscate by power or cunning what is necessary to the life of the neighbour. Do not steal, do not commit adultery, do not covet, cheat, lie. These commands set limits that require each person to conduct themselves as a responsible member of the community. This sets limits to protect people and their property. It was designed to stop the powerful pharaohs coming along and leaving you destitute.

Thirdly special mention must be made of the fourth commandment of the Sabbath where we find at the core of creation the invitation to rest. In the version in Deuteronomy (5.12-15) this command is rooted in the Exodus memory and concerns rest for the slaves.

Here it is connected to the order of creation. It looks backwards and imagines God on the seventh day either spent and needing to rest, thus vulnerable, or so serenely situated in creation that God was able to be at ease.

Either way, the conduct of God on the seventh day is in sharp contrast to the world of Pharaoh, in which there is no rest but only feverish productivity. Work, work, work you slaves! The command is about respecting life and putting limits on production and consumption. It was a call to rest but also to rest in the presence of God – this is a holy day – to find your peace and security in the love of God and not in feverish activity.

In giving the Ten Commandments God invites us to choose to do things that will make the world a better place – free from exploitation and corruption. The Ten Commandments can become a vision of where we are heading in Christ. 'You shall not' comes with an authoritarian tone. 'You will not' suggests how through a developing relationship our personalities and lives are moulded into the purposes and ways of God.

To pick up Freud again, Christ acts as our superego – the one who shapes our personality and our passions. Not because we have to but because we want to. We have discovered that in Jesus Christ are the grace and the love to set us truly free. Like the God of Sinai who rescued the Israelites from slavery, in Jesus Christ we have found someone who transforms life.

When you become a church member you are not joining a club. You don't sign up to agree to the rules and pay your subscriptions. You are declaring your covenant to follow Christ and your desire to follow Christ with us. Together as we go on this journey we will be shaped and changed by those relationships of love between each other and between us and God and hopefully find the freedom of faith following the Lord Jesus.