

*This is Weird, But in a Good Way*

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

Third Sunday in Lent, Year B — 3 March 2024

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

*Exodus 20:1-17, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, John 2:13-22*

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN

The other day I pulled up behind a Tesla—when don't you pull up behind a Tesla in Canberra these days? Perhaps the Tesla driver was a bit embarrassed, because there was a bumper sticker that read "I bought this before I knew Elon was weird". My point today is that belonging to the Church is weird, and Christians need to appreciate that—weird in a good way, I hasten to add, but weird nonetheless, by which I mean unconventional, and not quite the stuff of a normal life.

We're not just weird because public gatherings on Sunday mornings are weird—with standing, sitting, affirming, declaring, and singing, with ritual eating and drinking—though of course all this *is* weird. And we're not just weird because people wearing weird costumes do weird things up the front, using weird language in weird architectural spaces—though all these things, too, *are* objectively weird.

What's *especially* weird is the Christian faith itself, and the Church that serves as its bearer, its vector, its institutional vehicle among the other institutions of our world. Yet in the ages of faith, up to the mid-twentieth century in the West, the extent of that weirdness often wasn't appreciated.

I grew up in a nominally Anglican home. I remember asking my adopted parents about the Christian faith, and being told about the ten commandments, which supposedly spelled out a life of docile obedience to the dictates of respectability. We heard these ten commandments in our first reading today, from Exodus. Some of us might remember churches where the ten commandments were up there on the front wall so people could read them when they knelt at the altar rail to receive communion. Indeed, in that bygone world Christianity was often reduced to moral conformity, but with pictures. And, in some places still, Christianity serves as a badge of cultural, racial, and moral superiority, for instance in the perverted zeal of Donald Trump's white Christian nationalism. As a result, new generations longing to be free of all that have rejected Christianity, which often sees Christian morality mocked and derided as an oppressive burden.

But if you see how the ten commandments start, and how they form part of a bigger picture in the Exodus story, you see something quite different—something much weirder than a conformist and confining picture. The ten commandments start with a picture of who God is: the God of the Exodus who loves and liberates God's people, wanting them to find lives of love and freedom—including freedom from the bitter envy and rivalry that the tenth commandment presents as the antithesis of a psychologically healthy life. And with that comes all the earlier commandments, which flesh out what freedom looks like.

So, friends, the ten commandments are best seen as a charter for lives no longer bound to be paltry and petty and predatory—they're not about stifling conformity, then, but about true liberty; they're not about anxious self-regarding respectability, but about assured psychological maturity. Instead of repressive rules, the ten commandments show how being known and loved

by God can play out in an ordinary human life for everyone's benefit. And this is decidedly weirder than widespread pro-Christian or else anti-Christian mentalities typically imagine.

Another aspect of the conventional, respectable, moralistic albeit non-churchgoing Christian environment of my upbringing was its innate conservatism, its obsession with good order and keeping up appearances. This is why serious lapses in that world were often covered up, drawing a veil of assured serenity over the characteristic messiness of human and indeed institutional life. Such coverups happened in families, in workplaces, in sports clubs, in children's homes and asylums, in the military, and of course scandalously in the churches, so that trust in institutions and especially religious ones has fallen to a low ebb.

But then in today's Gospel we see something very weird indeed, and hard to fit with a reassuringly conventional picture of religion. In today's Gospel reading we do *not* meet the gentle Jesus meek and mild who underwrites social conformity and a prevailing mood of niceness. Instead, we meet the Jesus who staged his public protest in Israel's most holy place, intent on outing and overturning corruption in institutional religion. But he didn't do so as an angry anarchist, let alone a spoiler venting his own emotional damage. Instead, Jesus' radical act was one of love for God and love for God's people. Through Jesus, *in* Jesus, God's holy place was being restored, not despaired of or hated or condemned.

St Paul, writing to the Corinthian Church in our second reading today completes this picture of weirdness. Humanity's preference for taking self-justifying and self-deceiving poses is named in this reading, which in many places wears the mask of religious devotion. Often, we humans can't be budged from our unreflective postures, biases, and delusions, sometimes relying on religious beliefs and practices. Such religion provides the social glue that holds unhealthy groups together in many places. And this is what today's 1 Corinthians reading attacks—all that so-called wisdom; all that self-righteous, self-congratulatory certainty. Again, this was the function of religion according to the worldview of my childhood home, growing up as I did in Joh Bjelke-Petersen's Queensland, where everyone needed to be kept in their proper place.

In our 1 Corinthians reading, however, all this is called into question by the weirdest aspect of all in Christian belief: that Jesus Christ, who Christians know as God with us, was publicly executed by the social and religious forces of conformity and good order, with many no doubt presuming that God had smiled on all they did to Jesus on Good Friday. But the ultimate testimony of Christian weirdness is that, rather than affirming and underwriting it, God actually *underwent* what those forces of rectitude, decency and order did to Jesus on the cross. The sacred social order of the day—represented by the local religious authorities and the divine Caesar's Roman representatives—was revealed by the cross as the fragile and nasty human creation that it was.

Yet it was this Jesus, broken and defeated on the cross, who erupted on Easter Day as God's new, world transforming force with his resurrection, in which we find at last the true meaning of God, and of holiness, and in which we receive the Church's true calling. That is, to be weird, though in a good way—weird in a world where both pro-religious and anti-religious forces often miss the whole point.

So then, finally, because the heart of our Christian vision is demonstrably weird, we must be allowed a bit of weirdness in the way we celebrate it Sunday by Sunday. Because what we do here is the tried-and-true means whereby Christians are shaped and formed over time by something that we must come to recognize as unconventional, and not quite the stuff of a normal life.

The Lord be with you ...