
LENTEN STUDIES

YEAR B

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THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR B

Exodus 20.1–17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1.18–25; John 2.13–22.

Welcome to our studies and reflections for the third Sunday in Lent. Once again we continue our journey through this Lent reflecting on what covenant partnership and fellowship with God requires of us.

Once more we begin our reflections on a piece of scripture that is another challenging story of God's covenant with his people. We have reflected on Noah and then Abraham and Sarah and now we explore the covenant given on Mount Sinai; the covenant of God with the liberated slaves who He wishes to be his be his covenant partners for the sake of the whole of creation.

Read on. I am sure you will be familiar with what follows.

Exodus 20.1-17

Then God spoke all these words:

²I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me. ⁴You 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. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹For six days you shall labour and do all your work. ¹⁰But 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. ¹¹For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

¹²Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. ¹³You shall not murder. ¹⁴You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵You shall not steal. ¹⁶You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour. ¹⁷You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

Reflect on your past experiences with what are known as the Ten Commandments. Sometimes they were displayed on boards in churches in the sanctuary on either side of the altar. They were taught in confirmation classes. The older communion services had them embedded in the services.

What effect, if any, have they had on your life? What effect if any do you think they might have had on our social or political life together?

The context of the commandments in the book of Exodus had no such a benign or prosaic setting. It is set in an arid land, at the foot of a mountain, among a bunch of escaped slaves who, about three

months before, under the audacious leadership of a man called Moses had confronted Egyptian power and broken its shackles over them in the name of a god who gave his name as YHWH. They had faced raids from other dwellers in the space they traversed, they nearly starved and died of thirst. In all these events the man Moses represents a God who disdains the political and military power of Egypt, who acts as a Liberator, for whom desert raiders are no match and to whom the created world offers obedience and renders up its bounty of food and water. Moses explains that this God is the God of their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But these are vague almost mythical memories after 400 years in Egypt much spent in slavery.

So here at the foot of the mountain is this wild, often ungovernable, mob. They are about to meet their God. They are about to find out what it means to be descendants of Abraham and Sarah. They are not the least bit prepared to become covenant partners with this alarming God.

And Sinai does not make it any easier. Exodus 20 is set in the story of a great epiphany of a God who is far too dangerous to approach and yet who wants to be their God. He is a Liberator and a Protector and a Provider. That's handy. But now he is about to interfere in their politics and their daily life. He is about to create a new society and, as it will prove over time, they are not the least bit happy about that.

What we know as the ten commandments are the core of this brand new development. The total package as we now know it Genesis to Deuteronomy became known as Torah, the teaching or the law.

Thus they are a little different to the domesticated version in the Anglican Church. Mostly they receive a brief nod of recognition and not much else. We don't feel like liberated slaves (because we aren't) but like them we are certainly not happy to invite into our cosy religious life a God who is as dangerous, risk-taking and interfering as this One.

Read and reflect on 20.1–11.

We normally think of law/ethics as a list of rules for moral or legal behaviour. This does not seem like a list of ethical rules even though there are commands in it. What does verse 2 tell us and why? What is the claim it is making? What questions does that raise for you? In other words why all the God-talk?

I thought about the following: This is all about God the liberator who creates new things among human beings. This is all about how the liberated slaves were to practice God in their common life. This means every sphere of life to be lived around one single loyalty and before God, in YHWH's presence without the distracting compromises of other Gods

God is not a means to an end but the end and cannot be confused with creation. Worshipping idols is never free from the ideology of power over often seen in technological abuse of creation and military might. So God's name cannot be used for such ends, for God cannot be used as a means for my ends. Read 20.8–11 God's holy time.

What do you make of it after centuries of Sabbatarian abuse and legalism?

Have you thought of Sabbath as a work stoppage? After all many citizens live their lives at the behest of someone else's goals. How about some disengagement from the politics and economics that drives that? In the covenant humans are ends, not means to get someone else's bank balance looking healthy. This new society of slaves will not treat each other as instruments but as created under God (hence the reference to creation). Can you see the connection with no idols, One Creator as the sole focus? Maybe there is some profound politics here.

Read 20.12–17 One holy people

The fourth commandment gives the foundation for what follows. Human beings are not to be abused or exploited.

This includes parents for the command is not about obeying parents without question or parents abusing children, but instead, stopping the abuse of older people. Now as then they could be driven out of home, or abused when they could no longer work.

They were a drag on the economy. In other words they were useless, no longer working cogs in the political or economic machine. To honour means growing in dignity for both parent and child.

We are discovering the neglect of the elderly in our society. How can we be covenant partners with God in this matter? If you are aging what spiritual and practical issues does this highlight for you?

Human life belongs to God and may not be ultimately violated. We can think up all the casuistry we can to avoid this command but we cannot escape it. I know some of you do not like the reformer John Calvin but here is something he said on this, “that we should not only live at peace with men ... but also should aid, as far as we can, the miserable who are unjustly oppressed, and should endeavour to resist the wicked, lest they should injure men.”

How can I live faithfully in human relationships? How can I make relationships positively life-giving, nurturing, enhancing and respectful? How can I nurture long term trust?

What makes a society viable? What makes us socially viable? What is the effect of stealing on human personhood and society? But what about a society where inequality is such stealing to live is real?

Why is truth telling so important in communities. Why is deceit so destructive? Why are distortions of reality and collusion with vested interests so damaging?

Instead of covetousness let's use acquisitiveness or more strongly, grasping or rapacious. Does that make a difference to the way you read the last commandment? The word destabilizing occurs to me. Perhaps entitlement too, that is to whatever we may want no matter who else may get hurt along the way.

This is the way in to the new social, political and economic reality for liberated slaves living in the presence of God. They have never been revoked. They remain the non-negotiable will of God not only for Israel but for the world. This is how God wants the world created in human life.

I have found reading and reflecting on the ten commandments quite overwhelming. Take some time to pray for forgiveness and a way forward.

How will this community of liberated slaves sustain themselves on this risky journey with this God who has such a vision of human life?

Read the psalm as a response to vision of Sinai. As you do, note the connections with the first reading.

Psalm 19

¹The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

²Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.

³There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;

⁴yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of
the world.

In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,
⁵which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

⁶Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hidden from its heat.

⁷The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul;
the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple;

⁸the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes;

⁹the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring for ever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.

¹⁰More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.

¹¹Moreover by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.

¹²But who can detect their errors?
Clear me from hidden faults.

¹³Keep back your servant also from the insolent;
do not let them have dominion over me.

Then I shall be blameless,
and innocent of great transgression.

¹⁴Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to
you,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

C.S. Lewis once described Psalm 19 as “the greatest poem in the psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world.” Can you see why?

What struck you about the things this psalm says about God, the world, the Torah and human beings? Take time to reflect on these.

Let's break the psalm up into three parts (it is a unity) for the sake of our meditation and learning.

Take verses 1–6 and sit with them. What does the poet celebrate? Without speaking what does the created order celebrate? Remember we humans are part of that order although we come up for special attention later. Remember this is powerfully figurative language e.g. they can't speak but their voice can be heard to the end of the world. Enjoy the language and immerse yourself in it.

A psalm celebrating creation can't answer the questions of how things came to be but it can point to an answer to another prior question, why anything at all. It also tells us creation is creation and not a god. But it does act as a display of God's beauty, as a source of inexhaustible knowledge about itself and God. The sun is a metaphor of God's desire for life giving not life taking and also of shedding light in dark places; nothing escapes God life or light on darkness.

Remember that the Sabbath has its place in the creation narrative and places rest and worship in that context.

How can Sabbath, rest, and the liberating and creating God shape our responses to humankind's present unrelenting waging of war on the created order?

When you have finished read verses 7–10. These describe the nature of God's Torah (perfect) and the effect it can have on human beings (reviving the soul). Read 7–9; note and reflect on them. How does God's revelation of himself and his desire for a world where human beings are not means but ends, where they are not abused or exploited, but instead where humans beings can flourish in joy, wisdom, find enlightenment, find renewal, and live right relations of love and justice confront the church and the world?

Creation for all its wonder and delight cannot give us the personal word from God (revelation) that restores us, enfolds us and enables us even when our pride surprises and overcomes us. It gives us the metaphors we need but not what binds them together in a whole.

Of course, the God's revelation must transform us as individuals. Read 11–14. What is the issue the psalmist faces here (11–13)? What plagues us? Where can we turn?

When we fail as God's covenant partners we turn to God who reveals himself as the "clearer" of sins. Only then living in God's forgiveness and love can I find a life that prospers.

Pray verse 14 as your prayer for the day.

But where to from Sinai and Torah? Doesn't experience teach us that the vision seems to have diminished, even failed over time? Hasn't the tide simply run into the sand? Paul thinks not but you need to read his surprising take on what has happened.

1 Corinthians 1.18–25

¹⁸For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹For it is written,

‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’

²⁰Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. ²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

Behind the letters of the New Testament is always a story. Think about letters or emails or texts; they all have a story. And it may be hard for anyone else to read them and make sense of them.

I have spent a lot of my time in research looking at other people’s letters and I have to find the story that makes sense of them. Otherwise their power and knowledge is lost. I have just looked at the texts I have exchanged with some of my grandchildren. I seriously doubt anyone else would have much idea what the story was. However, there are clues in the texts to larger stories, theirs, mine, our family and even friends we share in common or political or social matters.

Paul’s letters are especially like that and we have only one side of the conversation. So when we come to interpret those letters we need to be a bit humble and try our hardest to pull together Paul’s story and his take on Messiah Jesus, and then engage that with the readers’ stories, and the swirling religious, political and social life of Paul’s day.

It seems that one of the problems in the church at Corinth was its love of power (we can recognize that) and wisdom. Usually we think of a wise person as someone who can discern things about life and help us discern things about life, too. They are great to have around and be around. But what happens when a supposed wise person turns out to be a peddler of wind, perhaps someone who deals in abstractions instead of concrete realities, who loves legal and philosophical minutiae?

Paul knew that he preached a crazy message. Messiahs are not crucified and dead people don’t get out their graves. The story did (and does) invite mockery. And if you belong to a socially pretentious sector of the population that is a serious downside.

There is famous caricature drawing and inscription found in Rome on the Palatine that shows a slave (not a wise or powerful person) falling down before a crucified donkey under which are the words “Alexamenos worships (his) god.”

Paul has already critiqued their argumentative, fractious disunity which he claims empty the cross of its power and conceals its wisdom (10–17). Then in the passage that we have read he turns the subject on its head and says something like “Let me tell you how stupid God is.” “Let me explain the utter folly of God when it comes to power and wisdom. He puts all his bets on a crucified Messiah, and a Jew to boot.” Then, as if he has thrown all rationality out the window he argues that this crucified Messiah is the source of wisdom when it comes to knowing anything worth knowing about God and is also the source of the only power worth having, power that restores the whole person from the fractured being that he/she is into the image of God. That power is the source of the renewal of the whole creation. This is God the creator at work again but in the person of a crucified Messiah.

Read the passage again and let its full effect take hold on your imagination. How can we as a church/congregation or individual find alternate sources of wisdom and power for ourselves? What might they look like?

How does this text help us on the journey being covenant partners with God in his desire for a new creation?

Where does the centre of our spiritual life need to be? What might happen if we don't? How can we hold the centre?

Now we move from God's folly to God's glory in the person of Jesus who has just changed water into wine and “revealed his glory” in the wedding at Cana. This story however takes place in Jerusalem, in the Temple and at Passover. Those are all important signposts that we will need to pay heed to.

John 2.13–22

¹³The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶He told those who were selling the doves, ‘Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!’ ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’ ¹⁸The Jews then said to him, ‘What sign can you show us for doing this?’ ¹⁹Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ ²⁰The Jews then said, ‘This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?’ ²¹But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²²After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

I suspect many of us know the story of the cleansing of the Temple in Jerusalem quite well. Time and use has smoothed its astonishing, offensive and confronting nature. Matthew, Mark and Luke place the events at the beginning of holy week as we call it.

John puts it here to make it clear that Jesus' whole ministry, words and deeds, is confronting to the wisdom and power of the leadership of ancient society. The power was built on economics, religion and politics. From Jesus point of view it reeked. Everything from now on in the gospel story tells the story of how the new 'Temple' was built.

A place to start is to understand the place of the Temple in the imagination of first century Judaism might be Psalm 50.2 "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth." Zion includes the Temple as the place where God dwells with his people. It is a place that generates beauty and light because of the presence of the Glory. It is that kind of poetry that infuses the imagination of the Judaism of Jesus' day. Psalm 50 imagines the Temple as the unifying, vivifying sacrament of God's presence in glory beauty and light.

Take time to imagine the psalmist's picture.

That is the social imaginary. The sociological and practical reality was different. Wealth, trade, compromising politics with the Romans mingled with worship, music, national celebration and mourning. We know nothing like it.

What Jesus does is focus the attention on the imaginary of the perfection of beauty, God shining forth. From that perspective the Temple politics and commerce reeks.

To understand this, focus on Passover as the celebration of liberation of slaves into freedom and into covenant partnership with God (see above). It is the setting here. The Temple is the home where slaves are set free and find God's beauty in that salvation. What did Jesus' action say to the people and what might it suggest for us on our journey?

Think over how Jesus describes the Temple in verse 16. What does it tell you about Jesus and about the Temple?

Link that with what Jesus says about his death and resurrection 18–22. Can you see what astonishing claims he was making? Can you get the sense of how offensive and confronting they might have been?

This week's readings have stimulated us in so many directions. Choose one train of thought or imagination that you have had and spend time with it in God's presence. What is it about this thought or imagination that stimulates you? What can you do about it?