

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

27th May 2018

Exodus 19:1-6, 20:1-4

Spirit... may you invite us to take what we hear... and transform the words into a movement... that comes alive in our life as a community... come spirit... may we be part of the great reimagining of the church...

Talking of re-imagining... the General Assembly has been meeting this week... Each minister only has a seat every fourth year... unless he or she is very keen and can apply for one of the few spare places that arise when others can't go...

Pleasingly however this wasn't my year to go... I got to watch the royal wedding instead... and Bishop Michael Curry preach... and it felt at times the assembly could have done with such passion and vision... when it felt instead... the assembly was frustrated... the church restless... and uncertain... with no clear vision of itself... The church... like much of the west... seems to be tired... and unsure of what it is about...

It felt some people wanted to plan and control the church... yet the spirit of the assembly rejected all that... from a ten year strategic plan... to questioning the Church's subordinate standard... the Westminster Confession of Faith... which the theological forum has been instructed to look at again... a document few would admit will enthrone anyone to join the church...

All symptoms of the West's great paradigm shift in how we understand ourselves... but it all seemed so dry... and cloistered... compared to Bishop Curry's lively and still talked about sermon from the royal wedding... Its passion and wildness... felt like what the General Assembly wanted... but its councils never gave...

Of course... you can't run a great institution like the Church of Scotland... the same way you preach a sermon... with a catch phrase... There's power in the power of love...

Actually... is that not what we heard first... in the Sinai desert... a 1000 generations ago...

Picture Bishop Curry... at that seemingly less than sturdy lectern... with those jaunty candles... that were ever ready to lose their purchase and go skiting across the chancel floor... But lets imagine it isn't Michael Curry with his arms waving... turning to engage everyone around him... Imagine it is God... almost singing... not the words we heard last Saturday... but these words we hear this morning...

Say to the house of Jacob... tell the Israelites... You have seen what I did to the Egyptians... and how I bore you on eagles' wings... and brought you to myself... Now therefore... if you obey my voice and keep my covenant... you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples... Indeed, the whole earth is mine... but you... shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation...

There's the original version of... There is power in the power of love... You see... before any of us get to read one word of the ten words... it is written there right at the beginning... with the enthusiasm of Bishop Curry... flaying his arms with passion... God establishes a relationship with the people... before any law is offered...

God establishes love... and sets it there before any commandment is uttered... The relationship comes first... the law comes second... See what I did for you... see how I bore you on eagles wings... see how I brought you to myself... Only once God has set the relationship... does God make any claim on our behaviour...

There is power in the power of love... Get that sorted... everything else is secondary... So let's forget trying to behave our way into heaven... no one can use the law to earn salvation... God establishes the relationship first... then comes the law...

There is power... in the power of love... Everything else is secondary... which is why... for ourselves here... we continually and repeatedly go back... go back... go back to the core phrase of our congregation... love God and love neighbour... because there is power in the power of love...

Establish the relationship first... with each other... the rules are secondary... and there seemed to be moments this last week in General Assembly... that through strategic plans and other debates... rules, quotas and outcomes were about to tip the balance... bu they never got through... there's power in the power of love...

There is an argument that the more rules we have... the more law there is... the less we trust each other... the less we respond to each other through grace and love... we live towards each other by rules of what we can and can't do... so we become less engaged... less trusting of each other... and our society is shaped by rights of the individual... rather than relationships shaped by love...

But we have discovered love comes first in the ten commandments... Yet they have been painted in gold across courtrooms... there is a great image of Moses receiving them on the wall of the robing room of the House of Lords... and are the ground work of our legal system... But they are not for judges... or lawyers... to use to make judgements on people's behaviours or rights...

God didn't cast them as some jurisprudence for law makers... God made the covenant with the whole nation... with all the people... These are basic simple principles by which everyone is to relate to each other... not based on rules for the individual... but based on relationship...

And perhaps they need to be heard as that again... as they were originally given... especially as our future feels so uncertain... and we live in fear of each other... and our politics and theology divide... so that what was once thought extreme... has now become mainline...

The first two commandments are about what we worship... or idolise... Jonathan Sacks comments... anthropologists 500 years hence... examining the books that were on our library shelves... would be inundated with literature about self help... self esteem... being true to ones-self... politics about individual rights... and ultimately... that new religious phenomenon... the selfie... and would conclude that it is what we worship... the self...

Yet... no where in the Bible... is there such a focus... Everything is in community... and the commandments are case in point...

Living by the commandments moves us from the politics of me... to the politics of us... They move us from idolising the individual... to loving the other... because the

commandments begin with... and then help shape... a relationship... It establishes a way of living in community that isn't about me... but about my neighbour...

An easy way to get what the commandments are about... is to substitute all the language we use about self... with the word other... instead of self-obsessed... other-obsessed... instead of self aware... other aware... instead of self-serving... other serving...

The commandments establish the relationship with others first... and in so doing reveals an intuitive truth in the bible... there is power in the power of love... the ten utterances reveal the truth that a community is strong... when it cares for the weak... a nation is rich... when it cares for the poor... we become in-vulnerable... when we care for the vulnerable... because they move us away from self to other...

There is where it all begins... with our relationship... with our neighbour... That's what the commandments ask us to establish first in every project... idea... plan... dream we might have in our congregation... and church nationally... move away from self and our own importance... and begin with the other... everything else is secondary... When you've got with that relationship sorted... you know the power... in the power of love...