

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

10th June 2018

Exodus 19:1-6, 20:12-16

Spirit of life... of imagination... of community... may you tangle these things together... that we might create something new... something more real for the world... that brings us life... So be it... Amen

I went to the Garden of Love,
And saw what I never had seen:
A Chapel was built in the midst,
Where I used to play on the green.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut,
And Thou shalt not. writ over the door;
So I turn'd to the Garden of Love,
That so many sweet flowers bore.

And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tomb-stones where flowers should be:
And Priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars, my joys and desires.

I like poetry... I have a book of the collected works of RS Thomas by my bed... Most of it I don't understand... but then I have a bible by my bed too... and you can say the same thing much of the time... because faith is not always comprehensible... and our experiences of life open new ways and close down old ways of understanding what is there...

But I love it because of that reason... It is ever evolving... growing and shifting as it evolves... You can't capture it... Scripture... Faith... God... keep moving... it is always alive... becoming a new thing... through its relationship with the world... offering a new word for a situation... grounding itself among us so it is within reach... and yet at the same time... beyond reach... unable to be captured...

Which makes William Blake's scathing poem... 'The Garden of Love'... all the more tragic... for it pictures an institution... that has become oppressive and controlling... that uses its power to control faith... and in doing so... places tombstones where flowers should be... taking the life *out*... of that which should be life affirming...

It is not... I trust... how we experience the church locally... Heaven forbid that we feel managed and institutionalised... though I know there are times when such is our experience... where power... and legalism rise to the surface... and whenever that has been... and whatever it was... it was only church in name... and not spirit...

Here... our core values centre on two things... love God... and love neighbour... and everything we do... centres round making these things happen... Here we offer a 'yes' to opportunity... to dreams... to visions...

And to affirm that 'yes'... that 'yes' to freedom to express that love of God and love of neighbour... one of the most significant places to find that... is the ten commandments... which is perhaps not the expected place to find such a positive and generous invitation to be free to love... especially as our spirits more readily hear... the gates of this chapel were shut... and 'thou shalt not' writ over the door...

Yet... it is the ten... and especially commandments 5-9... that speak in a positive way... We read... "Thou Shalt Not"... but we hear that as a prohibition... Thou shalt not kill... Of course I don't... Adultery... No... Thou shalt not lie... Not often... Thou shalt not steal... Never been caught doing that...

We read them as 'do not's' for which there are obvious punishments if we do.....

But there aren't... The Ten Commandments... have no punishments... because they are not law... Any law... including the bible... has consequences... If you do this... then that will happen...

Not the ten... because they are not written as limiting statements... They are quite the opposite... They are positive guides on how we do community... They are anti-authoritarian... anti-legalistic... for they are about creating a good neighbourhood... built on outward looking relationships...

There is a very strong sense in the Old Testament... as well as the New... that individualism anathema to God... The far richer and more authentic seam in our faith... is one of community... of neighbourhood... of nation... and that God... collectively... responds and saves the people... It is as a nation they are saved from Egypt... It is the

whole of Nineveh that is saved from wrath... It is the entire community that is saved in Babylon...

That whole idea of individual, personal salvation is alien to a faith that is expressed most authentically and most fully... through community and nation and neighbourhood...

The point is... the ten commandments... and especially those we reflect on today... direct us to focus on someone else... not ourself... To make God's community... God's kingdom... the priestly nation... we have to turn towards the 'other'... our neighbour... in a particular way...

And in a world of Brexit... and trade tariffs... and G7... or is it 6... or perhaps 8... where Blake's poem seems to speak beyond the church... the ancient ten... one of the oldest charters we perhaps have... might be the key to a more inclusive, positive global community...

Do not kill... is not a protection for yourself against another... It is a protection your neighbour has from you... That is how these things work... Imagine a world where that is a protection North Korea has from the US... It is not about what rights we have from what others do to us... but the moral responsibility we have towards someone else...

Adultery... what kind of relationship are you having with your neighbour... It is the responsibility each of us has in guarding the boundaries of your neighbour's family life... and not something you can use in court against someone else...

Not not steal... a moral responsibility to care for another's possessions in community... Imagine a world where multinationals live this commandment towards countries where they pillage their natural resources for their own profits... instead they have a moral responsibility to care for another's possessions...

Do not lie... This is not about defamation of character... but how we choose to speak of our neighbour... the responsibility we have to care for... and value others... through what we say about them... Imagine the twittersphere being run on that basis...

These ten commandments... offer a social vision... of what the kingdom community is to be... They aren't rules... but perceptions... insights... on what community means... and what we value within that community... namely the relationship we have with our neighbour...

The strength of them is that they connect us one another... because this is how we choose to live towards each other... this is how we build a common life... looking after another possessions... family relationships... their name... their safety...

So they are positive... life affirming... inviting us into a stronger relationship with each other...

Sadly Blake's dark poem on the legalism of our faith... is written in response to the failure of the church to do just that...

The poem never redeems itself... but the ten invites *us* to do so... for if they turn us towards our neighbour... and guide us in how we respond to the other... they invite us to see the value of the other... The moral imperative is that it is us who give worth to the other... through the way we create safe places... and moral responsibility for their relationships, possessions, standing...

Here is how you value our neighbour... It is not written in stone... but alive in our ever changing relationships...

These ten are not about self... they are wholly focussed... on the other... such is our faith... and such the means by which we build and design and re-imagine our community here...

References

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