

Lent 3 Exodus 20. 1-17, John 2. 13-22, 3 March 2024

One of my favourite films is the original version of *The Railway Children*. There's a moment in the film when Bobbie finds out that her brother Peter is stealing coal from the railway yard. "Don't you remember your catechism?" she says, "Thou shalt not steal, says the Lord". The film, made 54 years ago, looks quaint to our 21st century eyes. I recall my confirmation classes in the 1970s where we learned the catechism. I made myself a chart with the ten commandments on it and pinned it by my bed. At bedtime, I would give myself either a tick or a cross, depending on whether I'd kept all the commandments that day. Like the film, my 11-year-old self looks quaint, and I smile at my early attempts at what I now understand as the Examen, but I'm grateful that I was given that framework by the church as a way to live my life.

The ten commandments provide us with a paradigm to help us get our priorities in the right order. The catechism and being able to recite the commandments by heart may belong to a less complicated and simpler age, but the irony is that we need this framework more than ever to help us navigate our increasingly complex society and culture.

Matthew's gospel records Jesus being asked, "which commandment in the law is the greatest?" To which he replies, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it; You shall love your neighbour as yourself".

If you go to your service sheet and look at the reading from Exodus, you will note that we can divide the commandments into the two commandments Jesus talks about. The first three are all to do with putting God first, then commandments 5 through to 10 are all about love of neighbour.

Commandment number 4 on keeping the sabbath, verse 8 in Exodus 20, is the bridge between the two and perhaps the most helpful as a starting point for beginning to understand how these stone age life directives might guide and support us today.

My Lent book for this year is Walter Brueggemann's *Sabbath as Resistance*. I've read it before, but it's a book that's worth returning to again and again as an antidote to our hyper-connected, over consumptive society. In the book Brueggemann argues that the 4th commandment is not about piety. Rather, it offers us a way of resetting our priorities to focus on God and others.

The hard truth is our over consumptive society is making us sick. It's now a truth universally acknowledged, that social media is addictive and a time thief. Children and young people are being exposed to things that they have neither the experience or capacity to make sense of, and rates of poor mental health in this age groups are at an all-time high. 'Influencers' are selling perfect homes, perfect looks, perfect holidays, and lifestyles that are unattainable for most of us and therefore make us feel inadequate or somehow lacking. Children now panic if they're not connected to Tik Tok or whatever platform they use, for fear of missing out. FOMO, is a genuine worry for children and young people.

At the same time inequality has been on a general upward trend in the UK. The Gini coefficient is a way of measuring inequality within an economy and earlier

this year a report was published detailing the UK's score from 1977 to 2022. The general trajectory has been upward. In other words, the rich have got richer and the poor poorer. Such a trend invites us to ask questions of our society. Is this right and just?

Our Gospel reading recounts the story of Jesus driving out the money changers and merchants from the Temple. It's a story of major significance in the New Testament as it appears in all four Gospels, albeit with slightly different emphasis. In John's Gospel the account is used to help the community John was writing for deal with the trauma of the destruction of the Temple in AD70 – but that's another sermon and not the direction I'm going in this morning. Despite the Jerusalem Jesus knew being under Roman occupation there were still those in his own community who would do their best to make money at the expense of others. The need to pay Temple tax in Temple currency and buy animals for sacrifice had been turned into a first century rampant consumerism that clearly infuriated Jesus, and thus he drove the traders out yelling at them to stop making his Father's house a marketplace.

We need money, we need a functioning economy, we need markets for both goods and services, and we need the entrepreneurs that innovate and create employment. But as I've reflected on this passage the word that kept leaping out at me is STOP. And that's the argument Brueggemann makes in his book. We need to reintroduce the concept of sabbath into our lives. In so doing we will give ourselves time to breathe, to reorientate ourselves towards God and towards others. The world won't stop turning if they switch their devices off for 24 hours. We don't need to shop 24/7. We need to STOP.

Brueggemann goes on to suggest that our constant restlessness and dissatisfaction produces anxiety, which can then turn into aggression and ultimately violence. Violence against each other and our planet. The more we consume, whether that's physical goods or media the more dissatisfied we seem to become. Wars are raging round the planet. Gun violence is at an all-time high in the US and here in the UK knife crime has increased by 90% over the last 10 years. Perhaps, if we could give ourselves a break and learn to STOP, take sabbath rest, we might give ourselves a chance of keeping the other 9 commandments.

Many of us might want to lament at the state of the world but we don't need to be passive. Each of us has more agency than we might give ourselves credit for. As people of faith, we have been blessed with a paradigm of resistance. God commanded God's people to STOP. This morning we've heard the commandments as they were written in the book of Exodus, but they are repeated in Deuteronomy with some subtle differences and the differences in the 4th commandment are telling. In Exodus the reason given for the sabbath is that God rested on the 7th day and so should God's people, but in Deuteronomy the reasoning is that the people had been slaves, made to work all hours of day and night to service the Egyptian's desire for growth. God had rescued them from this servitude and in God's economy everyone gets a full day off – a sabbath.

The sabbath is a gift of God to God's people, and it's God's way of rescuing us from servitude. Perhaps in the week ahead we could all consider how we might use our sabbath time. It will look different for each of us but let us pray that through it we will each be reorientated towards God and each other.