

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
08-10-2023
St Cuthbert's Anglican Church – Tweed Heads

Exodus 20: 1-4, 7-9, 12-20 The Ten Commandments

Psalm 19 God's law is Holy, I want to keep it.

Philippians 3 I count everything as loss compared to knowing Christ
I press on towards the prize

Matthew 21: 33-46 Parable of the Wicked Tenants

Introduction

As we reflect on today's readings from the scriptures, I would like us to consider what is it, that guides us and directs us, as we seek to live out our lives.

In the Bible readings today, in Exodus, we have arguably the most famous set of rules in the world, the Ten Commandments, and then in Psalm 19 we hear how the Psalmist loves God's Laws and wants to live by them, because he knows they are good.

In the New Testament readings though, from Philippians and Matthews Gospel we hear more about what is behind the rules, and how knowing God through Jesus, should be our first priority. In Philippians we hear how Paul considers everything else as rubbish, compared to knowing Jesus. And then in Matthew's gospel, we hear Jesus telling a parable of the wicked tenants, warning the Chief Priests and the Pharisees, not to reject him.

Yes, we have rules and laws to guide us along life's journey, and these can be very good and helpful, but what is most important, is knowing the God who has given us the rules in the first place.

So today, I would like us to first explore what is behind the rules, and then look at the rules themselves.

Behind the Rules

Let us begin by looking at what is behind the rules and regulations that the Bible sets us, for living Christian lives.

Well first to be a Christian, means to be a follower of Christ.

It's hard to follow someone or something if you don't first love it or appreciate it. Because we've just had some big grand finals in some sporting codes in Australia, I would like to use the NRL as an example.

Now if you liked Rugby League, and the Penrith Panthers were your favourite team, do you think anyone would have had to say to you last Sunday night, "I think you should be watching the game tonight."?

If it was true that you followed the Panthers, you probably would have made plans to make sure you didn't miss the game, rather than be reminded that the game was on. If we love something it is natural that we are interested in it.

This holds true for Christianity also. Unless we first love Jesus, then we are unlikely to want to follow the way of life he has set out for us.

But why would we want to love Jesus?

Christians believe, that as human beings, we are created by God to live in a relationship with God. The big problem though is that we want to do things our own way and not God's way, and the result of this is that we are cut off from God. Jesus provides the way back to God. If we accept what Jesus has done for us in his life, death and resurrection, we are given the ability to live in a relationship with God.

We will all, as part of our human condition, break rules, but in Jesus we can be forgiven, and brought back into a right relationship with God.

So, I believe accepting Jesus, is the best thing we can do with our lives. Jesus gives our lives meaning and purpose. A couple of weeks ago I recalled the words of St Augustine about God:-

"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You."

I believe we have a yearning, a desire for more that this world has to offer, and I believe we find that desire in Jesus. If we truly understand and accept what Jesus has done for us, then it will be natural that we will want to seek to follow Jesus in our lives.

In chapter fourteen of John's Gospel, Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through me."

And earlier in chapter five of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says, "¹⁷ 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil.'"

For Christians Jesus is the fulfilment the things we call rules, that we find in the Bible.

But, Christian rules are not going to be of full benefit to our lives, unless the Christ behind the rules is our first priority.

The Rules Themselves

Let us now move on to looking at why we have rules.

As I said at the start, the ten commandments are probably the most well known set of rules in the world. We are given God's laws so that we can live in harmony with God and with one another.

A number of times in conversations, I've had people say something like this to me, "I don't really go to church, but I live by the Ten Commandments." Having wanted to continue on a positive note, I've never asked them how they have, "Remembered the Sabbath and kept it Holy." But I have sometimes been tempted too.

Jesus summed up the Ten Commandments, when he was asked what was the greatest commandment, and this is what he said:-

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.' (Matthew 22:37-40)

If we look at the Ten commandments, the first four are about "Loving God", and the next six are about "Loving our neighbour as ourself". I believe it is only when we embrace the first four, that is, "Loving God", that we can actually be enabled to love others. If our focus is beyond ourselves and onto God, then we will be enabled to love others. But if our focus is on ourselves, and not God, we will find it very difficult to love beyond ourselves.

Imagine how the world would be if everyone obeyed the Ten Commandments perfectly. No Family Conflict, No hurting others, No stealing, No lies, No jealousy. It seems inconceivable to me, but imagine how wonderful it would be.

Some secular people often view Christianity as an old, outdated set of rules which stop us from really living or having fun in life. The Ten Commandments are actually not like that at all, if you think about the consequences of them being fully lived out in community. If a community was to embrace the Ten Commandments and keep them with no exceptions, imagine what a wonderful place it would be. No need to lock anything up, no worrying about being hurt by others. I struggle to imagine how free and liberating it would be.

But, of course, we know we live in an imperfect world. But imagine a world without any rules at all, we would fall into anarchy where power provides the way of operating, and "Might controls Right". That to me is a terrifying thought.

That's why I'm glad we live in a world where some do embrace rules like the Ten Commandments. Rules will always be broken, but if we seek to live out our lives as followers of Jesus, and follow the Ten Commandments, then we will make the world a better place to be in, just as Jesus called his followers to do.

Conclusion

At the beginning I asked what guided or directed your life. I hope you have been able to appreciate from today's scripture readings that the best thing to guide and direct your life is Jesus.

Jesus came from the Jewish faith that gave us the Old Testament. The first followers of Jesus recorded his life, and the life of the early church, in the New Testament, and they acknowledged that Jesus said he was the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets.

I pray that as we seek to follow Jesus in our lives, we will be given the will, and we will be given the ability, to love God, and to love our neighbours as ourselves. Amen.