
Sunday 4th October – The Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity

Readings: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20 & Matthew 21:33-46

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

The Ten Commandments

And God spoke all these words:

‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

‘You shall have no other gods before me.

‘You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.

‘You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

‘Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work,

‘Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.

‘You shall not murder.

‘You shall not commit adultery.

‘You shall not steal.

‘You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.

‘You shall not covet your neighbour’s house. You shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.’

When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, ‘Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not let God speak to us or we will die.’

Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.’?’

Matthew 21:33-46

The parable of the tenants

‘Listen to another parable: there was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall round it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

‘The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them in the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. “They will respect my son,” he said.

‘But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, “This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.” So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

‘Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?’

‘He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,’ they replied, ‘and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.’

Jesus said to them, ‘Have you never read in the Scriptures:

“The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
the Lord has done this,
and it is marvellous in our eyes”?

‘Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.’

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet..

Reflection

It’s strange how your perspective changes the way you understand something as you read. I’ve read the account of the Lord giving the Ten Commandments to the people of Israel many times before, but I’ve never before been so struck by the short, easily overlooked, phrase: ‘They stayed at a distance’ (Exodus 20:18).

Like never before we are aware of the impact of staying at a distance from one another, how difficult it is to remain at a distance from those that we love and the affect that this distance can have on ourselves and other people. I was particularly struck when a colleague of mine who lives alone commented during lockdown that she hadn't touched another person in over twelve weeks.

When the Lord gave the nation of Israel the Ten Commandments, when they saw his power, his holiness, his majesty, they stayed at a distance. Was it something about him, or was it something about them that kept them at a distance? Either way the impact was devastating, distanced from the Lord who had called them and rescued them from the land of Egypt the nation of Israel began to rebel against him, worshipping idols and grumbling.

Distance is also a theme of Jesus' parable of the tenants, and at first glance it appears that it is the landowner, representing God, who distances himself from the tenant farmers, his people. But if we read on, we find that despite the separation the tenants are never far from the landowner's thoughts, however it is the tenants who act as though, because they are separated, the landowner is no longer relevant.

In this parable Jesus is highlighting the distance at which God's people can hold him despite his love, provision and attentiveness; but he goes even further. The landowner, seeing the disregard with which the tenants hold him, decides to end the distance and bring the tenants back into relationship with him by sending no other but his son, surely 'they will respect my son' (Matt 21:37)

'God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life' (John 3:16) At different times in our lives you and I, just like the people of Israel in Exodus and the tenants in Jesus parable, stay at a distance from God. Perhaps we are scared to approach, not knowing what reception we might receive, perhaps it's our sin that keeps us at a distance, or maybe we think that God is the one who is standing back.

But the truth of the Gospel is that, while we were at a distance, Jesus came to us; to live, die and rise again to make it possible, and show us how we can be close to God again. I don't know how long the governments social distancing guidelines will remain in our lives, but I know that there is no longer any reason for us to be separated from God. Amen.

Adam Rylett