

1 April 2017

**Ten Words** (Exodus 19: 16-18, 20: 1-21)

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The Book of Exodus is shot through with arresting, cinematic images. There's Moses with his arm outstretched and the waters of the Reed Sea parting; there's him striking the rock at Horeb and water pouring forth; and now there's God's voice issuing forth thunderously over the roar of the ram's horn, from the quaking and smoking mountain of Sinai. Little wonder Cecil B. DeMille's last and most famous Hollywood epic took as its subject *The Ten Commandments*. It's a high point in a story that's riven with drama.

As you know, over these last couple of weeks, we've been traversing the wilderness with the people of Israel as they've made their way by stages out of Egypt, lurching from crisis to crisis in need of water, then food, then water again. Finally, they've arrived at Mount Sinai. This is the place God had promised Moses at the very beginning he would lead the people to worship; it's where the covenant between Yahweh and Israel will be wrought. And here the people are introduced to the ways of being that are to shape their personal and communal life, ways of being that align them with God's being and so underpin their identity and integrity as God's people.

The Ten Commandments or – more accurately – the 'ten words' that God speaks to Israel in this episode are some of the most familiar in the Bible. They're placed at the beginning of what's called 'the Sinai tradition' – a vast and complex body of law that extends through the books of Leviticus and Numbers.<sup>1</sup> These ten words are the basis for all other law in Israel,<sup>2</sup> and they shape the legal codes and moral understanding of Judaeo-Christian cultures to this day. There's a sense in which they can stand alone – a

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), p.61.

<sup>2</sup> Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p.61.

set of precepts extractable from the surrounding narrative, able to be carved in stone, written on blackboards and t-shirts, promulgated as basic rules for just living. In the Exodus story, however, they emerge from and are constitutive of the people's relationship with God. I think this might turn out to be more important than we often recognize.

As I read the story, I'm struck, first of all, by the magnitude of this act of communication. I've said that for us these words seem familiar, almost routine. But, according to Exodus, there's absolutely nothing routine about the occasion on which they were first spoken and heard. In fact, it takes the whole of Chapter 19 for Moses to prepare the people for them. First God tells Moses that he wills to make the Israelites *his* people, and that their obedience to 'his voice' is what's required of them. Moses goes down the mountain to tell the people, who agree to do what the Lord says, and Moses goes back up to tell God they have agreed to the terms. God then warns that he is 'about to come to you in the utmost cloud' (19: 9),<sup>3</sup> and gives instruction about how the people are to consecrate themselves over the next three days and to wash their cloaks in readiness, and how no one is allowed to go up on the mountain or touch its edge on pain of death. Moses goes down to communicate this, and then has to go back a second time when God descends onto the mount in order to reiterate (at God's command) all that God has already said. And then finally, God begins to speak amidst trembling and roaring and the flashing of fire. So, this isn't just a Sunday school lesson. It's a very big deal. This is the word of God and it's dangerous to be around, almost too much to hear.

And what does God say? God begins by speaking God's self. 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery'. The people are reminded that the words to come issue forth from, are sourced in the being of the

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Alter (trans. and commentary), *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2004), p.424.

One who heard their cry, liberated them from bondage and provided for them in the wilderness. Acts of unimaginable power; freedom of infinite reach. Given that, says God, you are to give your allegiance to me alone and to substitute nothing in my place. You are not to make false use of my name, and you are to create space in your lives to rest in and remember me. And because of who I am, you are to live and you are to be towards one another as I have been towards you: you are to honour those who gave you life; you are not to destroy one another, to steal or betray, to lie or be in rivalry with one another. Your life together is a reflection of my life with you. Your just dealing with one another is an expression of your worship, of your obedience to me.

But maintaining this internal connection between right worship and right living proved hard for Israel. It's so much easier, it seems, to do the 'religious', cultic thing and neglect or exploit our neighbours. Or, in our context (since the 'cultic' thing is almost dead) to practice an essentially privatized 'spirituality' detached from life in community. I was recently in the northern beaches of Sydney, in a shopping district awash with Pilates, mindfulness meditation and aromatherapy studios. I don't want to denigrate these things in themselves – but I am suspicious of our culture's tendency to separate out what we call spiritual 'experience' and the search for private peace, from the embodied and often unglamorous practice of justice and neighbor love. Because, for the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Moses and Jesus of Nazareth, there is no such distinction to be made. Which commandment in the law is the greatest, they asked him and he said: "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 – it's equivalent to it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself". On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets'. (Matt. 22:36-40).

But this truth brings us, I think, to a confronting realisation. For we live in a context of such entrenched systemic injustice that it can feel almost impossible to love our neighbours as we do ourselves. Almost necessarily, whether we like it or not, we're

implicated in the exploitation of somebody. For starters, our nation is founded on stealing from and murdering indigenous peoples, and even now our elected government is intentionally destroying the lives of ‘aliens’ and ‘orphans’, asylum seekers in detention. The clothes we wear and the food we eat are likely, if we’re not vigilant and informed consumers, to have been produced by exploited or even slave labour; the production of the energy that heats our homes and fuels our transport brings destruction to the earth; and our social and employment structures tend systematically to exclude the disabled, exploit the young and unskilled, and exhaust many more. Even if we *want* to live justly, we’re enmeshed in webs of injustice. We cannot claim innocence, and it’s almost impossible to go morally ‘off the grid’. So where does that leave the integrity of our worship? And how do we live whole-heartedly, undividedly in the midst of such compromising circumstances, without falling either into neurotic, paralyzing guilt or into denial and inattention?

Well if, according to our biblical tradition, true worship is premised on our doing justice, so also is truly doing justice premised on worship – prayer. And there is, it seems to me, a particular practice of prayer, an expression of worship, that offers us a way of living with some kind of integrity in our compromised and compromising social systems. It’s called penitence, contrition. We acknowledge before God what we’re part of, whether willingly or not. We just name it. Sometimes with this acknowledgement we realise it’s possible and necessary for us to change our ways – to shift how we shop or what we consume, to engage in new forms of politics, new ways of being in our work or advocacy. But sometimes, on some issues, there is no obvious thing we can do or change – we recognize that (for whatever reason) we can’t do more, or do everything, or engage at the level needed. And here, it’s prayer that offers us a way to remain simply present to the truth even so, to bring our care and our powerlessness humbly before God, to open our contrite and broken hearts, and offer ourselves to become (how we do not know) participants in God’s grace and love. This kind of penitent truth-

telling doesn't make it all suddenly warm and fuzzy – it's no escape to untroubled peace. But it does bring all that is unreconciled and unredeemed in our way of life and our relationship with others, consciously into the presence of God, and that itself is part of reknitting the fabric of common life, helping to realise our solidarity, our at-oneness with all created things.

Today we've begun a conversation at Benedictus – about our Passion for Justice – how love of neighbor is being lived out in our lives and how that love might be further expressed, lived out, undergone. My hope is that in the coming weeks and months we might continue together to listen for God's voice in this – a voice which sometimes emerges thunderously from the smoking mountain top, and sometimes speaks, still and small, in our hearts.