

Order of Service 4 October 2020

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Introduction

Welcome to worship, for some of us in church and for some of us at home. We are grateful that today Revd Stuart Scott, whom many of us know well as the Training and Development Officer of the West Midlands Synod, is leading worship at Weoley Hill URC in the morning and at Bournville URC in the afternoon. And so, let us worship God as we proclaim with the words of today's Psalm that "the law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul....the commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes...." (Psalm 19: 7 -8)

Hymn How firm a foundation (RS 589)

Opening prayer

Faithful God, we wake to your presence and to the discovery of who we have become. You create us in Your image; you bring us out of slavery and into freedom; you restore our justice and peace; bless us as we offer you our worship and seek to walk your way, living the life of Jesus today as part of your coming kingdom.

Loving God, your love sustains us this day and every day. You speak to us, in our offering of worship at this time and in this place and across all time and in every place. You speak through us in our offering of witness and service in the communities in which you have set us. You call us again and again to be your people. You love us; bless and send us to be your people in the world, to share the blessing we receive. In Jesus name we pray Amen

Reading Exodus 20.1-20

Reflection

Last Sunday, at the Russian Grand Prix, Lewis Hamilton was given a 10-second penalty for a pre-race practice start in the wrong place in the pit lane. He wasn't happy, particularly when he came third in the race. Others can still catch him in the drivers championship.

How are you feeling this morning about rules? Do you think that rules are there to be broken? Or do you pass judgment on those who break the rules? Are some rules more important than others? What are rules for?

Boris Johnson recently contrasted the freedom-loving characteristic of the British people and the need to live at present within constraints. He was criticised by an Italian politician, who pointed out the essence of freedom is living within constraints.

We might have some sympathy with Thomas Edison, who invented the electric light bulb. He is quoted as saying "There are no rules here—we're trying to accomplish something." There are times when rules get in our way. We get so tied up in red tape that we cannot move forward or make progress.

But rules are everywhere – not only Formula 1, any sport or game, on the road, even in the park. There are apparently one hundred pages of rules for Formula 1. The depth of our knowledge of football might be measured by our understanding of the offside rule, and our ability to explain it to someone else. On the cricket field, how do you begin to explain the rules for LBW, with and without modern technology? To drive on our roads, it's not enough to have the technical knowledge of how the internal combustion engine or more modern technology works, not enough to know how to drive, the process of getting into the car, starting the engine, manoeuvring the vehicle; passing the driving test requires knowledge of the Highway Code. And you might have tried to play Monopoly with children (or even adults) who insist on making their own rules. Without understanding and keeping of the rules, the result can be chaos at best, anarchy at worst.

Moses responds to God's call and leads the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt to the land God had promised them. This is a time of transition and change; a new identity is being formed, a new relationship is taking shape. On this journey through transition, God goes with them, but there are conditions. The life they share is not a free for all, every man (or woman) for themselves, the survival of the fittest. God is fulfilling his purposes, but human beings, both leaders and followers, have a responsibility.

In the Exodus narrative nationhood is bound to God's presence and there are two main lines of thought with respect to the relationship we see between God and the Hebrew people.

The first is here in these ten commandments. They demand obedience and the people agree to follow them. The covenant between God and his people is established. The relationship has a moral and ethical basis. When it breaks down (and it will) there is a way back, or rather a way forward, in the love and mercy of God, because God cannot turn his back on who he is.

In the other line of thought, God's people are called to holiness. We see the tabernacle, the actual, physical presence of God journeying with his people. It is on Mount Sinai that those two lines come together. A community growing in its sense of identity and purpose in a time of transition is given a set of rules which both bind and free. They make it possible for people to live and journey together, in healthy and life-giving relationships with God and with each other.

These commandments have had an influence down through history, and in national life today, but they have never been legal documents as such. Law comes later and with a great deal more detail and technicality. Here we have the establishment of a covenant, but also a set of principles relevant today for healthy right living, for nationhood, bound up in the sacred and holy presence of God.

God has called into a new covenant through faith in Christ and as his disciples, to a time of transition to a new identity as the body of Christ, the instrument of his will and purpose in today's world. How then do our lives, the life of this church, and indeed the life of this nation under God demonstrate the presence and the promise of God? What is our response in worship, witness and service in our own community? What is the impact of the covenant with us? Are we rule-breakers or rule-makers? What are the rules, and what are they for?

Prayer

Creating God, may we see these commandments as hopes for the community; may we live towards each one knowing the way of life in community you choose for us.

May each commandment show your community: not individuals, but family, together in grace, hope, generosity.

May every commandment be a celebration of your life, recognising the best in each and shared with all, celebrating the gifts for neighbourhood, community, and nation.

Grant us the strength, wisdom and confidence to live and speak plainly and positively, to bring life, to live rightly, justly, and lovingly, as you invite us and equip us to do

Hymn Jesus calls us (RS 355)

Communion (in church)

Prayers for the people

God of all, when walls fall around us, when we face the wild, when the weather is against us, when we cannot see you, hold us close.

God of all, when we struggle to find life in all its fulness, when we look to cast blame and hold others responsible, when we are angry, frightened or sad, hold us close.

When things do not go according to plan, when the future is closed to us, when we cannot find truth, hold us close.

When there is too much or not enough noise, when the words and actions do not make sense, when we are or are not OK, hold us close.

God of all, hold close all who grieve, all who find life confusing and bewildering, all who live in fear or poverty, all deprived of opportunity through death, disaster, despair or disease.

[Silence]

God of all, reveal yourself in the power of your love and the grace of your mercy to bring encouragement, healing and hope.

God of all, hear our prayers spoken and unspoken and answer us according to your will and purpose, for we pray in Jesus' name and for his kingdom's sake. Amen

Lord's Prayer

Hymn Holy Spirit, truth divine (RS 301)

Offertory prayer

We pray, O God receive the gifts that we offer and grant that our lives may be lived in service to you and to all people and all of creation. Amen.

Blessing

Go in peace.....