

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 2 OCTOBER 2011

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Exodus 20: 1-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3: 4b-14

“A Handle on Life”

In the Church of my youth, the ten commandments concluded with the summary of the law as Jesus gives it in the gospels. They were read out every Sunday as the guide to life for every Christian person. They were drummed into us in school and Sunday school to such a degree that I can still recite them without too much trouble. I never questioned them at that stage, they were as solid as the granite tablets I imagined they had been chiselled into for Moses and his people when they gathered at Mount Sinai.

The questioning came later, but long before Francis Macnab came up with his rather derogatory comments a couple of years ago. I don't know how much you remember of that debate, but his main issue with them, I think, was the fact that they were negative and repressive, instead of positive and encouraging. According to him we, twenty first century rational people, were past those primitive laws that came to us from a distant past. He argued nowadays we know more and better how to help people grow to their full potential as emphatic, responsible, caring human beings than people did then. He attracted a lot of publicity with his congregation attracting large crowds for a while. And then it all died down.

The debate at the time encouraged me to look at the ten commandments again. I gave a couple of lectures on them both in and outside my congregation, and even had conversations with some of my Jewish colleagues who didn't feel at all comfortable with what they saw as ill informed misrepresentation of one of the most sacred parts of their scripture.

Along the way I gained some important insights into the meaning and interpretation of these commandments. And it may be helpful to share some of those with you today as we read the ten commandments in conjunction with Paul's witness about the law in Philippians 3.

First of all: as is often the case a lot is lost in translation when we read the ten commandments in English. This can be helped very simply by adding a few words which aren't there in the Hebrew, but are implied in the tense of the verbs that are used. This has to do with the fact that translating Hebrew tenses into English is by no means easy or straight forward. One important difference being that the Hebrew has a tense that includes past, present and future in all its forms that simply can't be translated literally in English. As with the name of God we talked about a couple of weeks ago, the letters JHWH can be taken to mean 'I am who I am, I will be who I will be, I am who I was, I will be who I was', etc. The "thou shalt not" of the translation of the ten commandments can be read as "this is how it should be, this is how it will be, this is how it could be, this is how it can be amongst you: a life without other gods, without idols, without bowing down, without worshipping other things, a life without swearing, a life where there is one day a week without work etc... That's how I, God, imagine life could be for you, if you would let me be at the centre of it.

That's not negative or repressive. That is encouraging one to dream of a world where life could be positive, liberated, unlimited by all sorts of negative powers and emotions. A life guided by a dream of how life could be if we applied ourselves to living it God's way.

There is another thing that only becomes apparent when we read the commandments in Hebrew. They come in poetic form, in a shape that illustrates the purpose and intent with which it is given. A poem that, when printed in a certain way, will take the form of a chalice, a chalice not dissimilar to the one here in front of me on the communion table.

The foot of that chalice represents the basis of a life with God. They are the commandments that refer to our living with others. No false witness, no lying, no coveting. What is of another is sacred and should not be touched, not even in our minds. And we should be reliable in our dealings with others, respect and faithfulness lying at the heart of an existence within the light of God's covenant.

The stem of the chalice, the part where we hold the chalice, are the commandments that give us a grip on life and keep chaos at bay. They are the commandments that refer to us and our actions. No killing, no adultery, no stealing. They are short, clear and practical. Life is sacred, faithfulness and trust are the handles with which we can manage our life in a way that is worthy of God. These are the things that are essential for anybody wanting to live a God-like life and wanting to make sure they want to keep a grip on it.

The cup itself is formed by the commandments about God. Unlike the other commandments these are explained and supported by reasoning. They talk about the mighty deeds of God, about God's compassion, about creation, the Sabbath and life in the land of God's promises. It indicates that this is not just any God that gives these commandments, but that it is the God of covenant, the God of liberation, the God of creation, the God of compassion that has given this chalice brimming with fulfilling life and love.

This chalice enables us to drink in life as God wants it to be, it is there to give us a handle on life. And rather than suppress or belittle us, it creates a safe space where we can grow into our full potential without infringing on others around us. Indicating where the boundaries are and what direction divinely inspired imagination would like us to move into.

Paul's life, before Christ entered into it, was guided and directed by those laws. Paul drank from that chalice but he discovered that there is more to life in faith than this.

That doesn't mean Paul agrees with Francis Macnab in saying that those laws are no longer valid, that they have become a thing of the past,

As a pious Jew that could never have been an option for Paul. Those commandments would have been drummed into him as much as they were drummed into me from childhood onwards. They were part of his psyche and would have been as natural and self evident a part of him as breathing or eating or drinking. Life, without those guidelines, without that cup to drink life from, was as unimaginable for Paul as it was for Jesus who said not even the smallest letter of the law had become superfluous because of his teaching.

What Paul discovers, as Jesus comes into his life, goes much deeper than that. What he discovers is that there is far more to a life that is touched by God than living it morally and ethically. That life is about more than "doing the right thing", even where morals and ethics and "doing the right thing" is absolutely necessary to safeguard any quality of life for everybody.

His encounter with Christ changes his outlook on life so significantly that it makes everything else pale into insignificance.

What I think Paul has discovered, if I translate it in my own words, is that faith is not about doing

God's work, but about being. It is about being touched by something that transcends and transforms us and this can do much more for us than performing good deeds or living a moral life.

That something is deeply personal and intimate. And it is probably slightly different for each one of us because it is an encounter with a living, changing, interacting reality beyond our understanding. When Paul entered that reality for the first time he significantly connected with that reality in and through Christ. Although he identifies it with Christ he struggles to find words for it and explain to others what it means for him. It is literally beyond him.

For a moment I want you to reflect on that in silence.

Have you ever, even remotely, caught a glimpse of what Paul is talking about?

Whatever it was that opened a door to glimpse something made all that usually takes up your life pale into insignificance...

Stay with it. Be in it.

Hold it and gently put it away in a corner of your soul where you will be able to access it again.

And then thank God for it.

Against the backdrop of that awesomeness now return to the ten commandments. What they want to do, what they are meant to do, what they are designed to do according to the scriptures is to help you live your life as close and as open to that reality as you possibly can. As close and as open as we imagine Jesus was to it. Amen.

The cup of life

I am the Lord your God. I liberated you when you were oppressed.

Make sure you keep your freedom. Stay with me.

Don't think that the way you picture me is all there is to know about me.

Don't mention my Name in matters I would not want to be associated with.

On my special day I want everybody to be free to celebrate,
make sure you leave others the opportunity to do so too.

Your mother and father are part of your life.

Don't abandon them,
then you'll live life fully.

Do not neglect to care for those
who devoted themselves to you
when you were too young
to care for yourself.

Do not murder anyone,
life is sacred.

Be faithful to whom
you've committed yourself.

Don't take for yourself
what belongs to other people.

Don't keep to yourself

what there is to share.

Be trustworthy in the way you talk about others.

Don't let your life be ruled by the longing to have other people's treasures.