Sermon preached by Revd Chris Baker on 4th October 2026

Readings: *Exodus 20.1-4,7-9,12-20; Matthew 21.33-46*

Now that autumn is here the programmes on television have perked up. The programme planners seem to assume that during the summer months we will not watch much or be content with an endless supply of repeats. But now we have an ample supply of new programmes to keep us fed – an ample supply of entertainment, history or intrigue, drama or dance. The ever popular *Strictly* opened with 5,000,000 watching the first live programme, and in that competition one couple performed a flamboyant quick-step. Commenting on the dance the chief judge, Shirley Ballas, said "Before you break the rules you need to know the rules."

I think she was speaking more truly than she realised. In a world like today's what we see is a widespread breaking of the rules, not of dance but of life. It seems that many people are not aware of the rules and so suffer the inevitable consequences.

Our reading from the Old Testament this morning was the listing of what we know as the Ten Commandments. The Bible tells us the story of a people set free. It is the story of some tribal people who had travelled to Egypt at a time of famine. They had been allowed to settle there but as time went by these Hebrews were enslaved and forced to do the work that the Egyptians themselves did not care for – brick making and construction. As the Hebrews became more numerous, the Egyptians became more vociferous, grumbling about them, about these immigrants and began treating them cruelly. It's a story with a vaguely familiar ring. The slaves cried out to God, though whether at that time they were truly aware of God is another question. Yet in time God sent a man called Moses to negotiate with the Pharaoh for their release. Eventually he was successful and he led the people out of Egypt towards freedom: perhaps the first great Freedom March of human history. And on the way they encountered God. At Sinai Moses went up the mountain and there he met with God and he returned to the people with these ten words, ten statements etched in stone. Here were the foundations of a divine society, a people living with their God. Oh, it's true that other peoples had similar lists, similar rules but what was unique with these words was that they were not the product of human thought but of divine wisdom. These were words from God, their God, whether they knew it or not, for it was he who had brought them their freedom, they were his people. The first statement made that clear '**I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods besides me.'** Moses knew his people; he knew their fickleness and before he died, he gave them this warning 'I set before you life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments, by loving your God, walking in his ways and observing his commandments you shall live and the Lord will bless you. If, on the other hand you are led astray and bow down to other gods, you will surely perish. Over the centuries the inevitable happened and one problem was that some people fell into the trap of confusing religious observance with faithful living. It's a common enough trap. The prophets pleaded with the people and distilled the commandments into the lovely words uttered by Micah. **He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.** It was a forlorn plea.

Centuries later when Jesus came, he found a yearning for the love of God among the ordinary folk; they were hungry for God. But he also found a system of religious observance centred on the Temple and run by men who had fallen into that trap – they confused the business of the Temple with the divine life; they confused the organisation of religion with godlike living; they confused their interpretation of the law of the Lord with the love of God. And their ears were closed; their minds were closed to the revelation that Jesus was bringing. Being a supreme storyteller Jesus told a story about a landowner who planted a vineyard – a popular thing to do even these days in this country. He leased it to tenants and at harvest time he sent his servants to collect the produce. The tenants were having none of it. They killed those servants; indeed they killed other servants sent to them and ended

up killing the landowner's son. Jesus turned to his listeners who were Temple priests and Pharisees and asked them, 'What was the landowner to do?' They replied 'Surely he would come and slaughter those tenants and give the lease to good tenants.' We can see Jesus nodding and saying **'Yes, I have to tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who produce the fruits of the kingdom.**

The religious authorities were not deaf to the implications. They knew that Jesus was talking about them but they couldn't do anything about it then, because the people recognised a prophet when they saw one. But still they looked for opportunities to trick him into saying something which they could use to destroy him. The Pharisees got a man with a legal mind to ask Jesus which was the greatest commandment. It was a question often debated by the rabbis. What would Jesus say? Would he quote Micah or another of the prophets? He came back with the great Shema, **You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.** These were words that every Jew was expected to say every day. And he continued with the application – **You shall love your neighbour as yourself.** On these two, he said, hang all the law and the prophets. Surely no one could argue with that. So once again the authorities were foiled but they were mystified by words which Jesus had spoken earlier when he had said that the kingdom would be taken away from them and given to a people who produce the fruits of the kingdom.

If the kingdom was to be taken away from them to whom would it be given? Now, there's a question. John Fenton, in his commentary on this passage, suggests that the kingdom was to be given to the Gentiles. Now it's true, of course, that the good news of the gospel was soon to be shared with the Gentiles. Quickly the gospel escaped from the confines of Jerusalem, spread out from Judea. Luke would have us imagine this to be like an explosion on the day of Pentecost as Jews from around the then-known world heard the story, were gripped by the faith and took it home with them. Perhaps more gradually the gospel was shared by Philip, by Peter, by other disciples, by Paul and what started as a small revolutionary movement within Judaism became a new universal faith. But its roots were and always will be there among the Jews. Jesus did not say he was taking the kingdom away from the Jews but from the Jewish leaders of his day.

So, if the kingdom was not to be given to the Gentiles in place of the Jews, to whom should it go? To the Church? If, by that we mean a structured organization, it seems to me to be unlikely. Over the centuries the Church has be riven by strife, arguments, divisions, even wars and has indulged in behaviour in which one might struggle to discern the love of God. Recently I was reading a report of the speech given by Mr Samuel Morley at the laying of a foundation stone of the church in which I grew up. 160 years ago the church need a bigger building. Mr Morley was a firm Dissenter and reading his views on, for example, the Church of England was distinctly uncomfortable. I trust we have moved on from those days and yet he was undoubtedly sincere in his desire to see the spread of the faith. He challenged his listeners. He said that, after attending once or twice a place of worship on a Sunday, and giving a slight amount of money, they should not imagine that their duty was at an end. He impressed upon them the important fact of their individual responsibility. They must impart the gospel to others and not rest satisfied with leaving religious efforts in the hands of the deacons and ministers. Until Christian people were alive to the individual responsibility attaching to them, he did not believe the world would ever be converted…' On that he may well be right so perhaps Jesus was hinting that the kingdom of God would be given to people of faith, building his community on the rock of faith such as Peter exhibited – the rock of a faith which recognises Jesus as the Messiah and which draws us in to our divine inheritance.

Today we live in a world in which there is so much that is good, so much that is wonderful, so much to be thankful for. But along-side of that there is a deep-seated anxiety and even fear abroad. Political pundits tell us that we are closer to World War Three than ever before and that this country is underprepared. We may feel that there are political leaders whose words and actions are unpredictable. Russia has hinted that if it was to be attacked then it would not hesitate to retaliate even using its nuclear weaponry. Meanwhile the debate continues about the use of AI. It seems that today many people have rejected the idea of God as truth, but we are now coming to worry about any truth – words, thoughts, pictures can be distorted for subversive reasons. So where is reality? Where is

honesty? Where is truth? And perhaps closer, in our everyday life, we know of the rise of lawlessness as shops battle against pilfering, against organised shoplifting and even charity shops are subject to theft. It just creates a feeling of unease.

Now, it might be argued that there is nothing in the Commandments to address some of these issues, and yet surely the very tenor of those statements and the whole thrust of the divine word are designed to create a sense of security and confidence, confidence and well-being which is ultimately centred on God. The rules, if we may call them that, are there to be heeded and we disregard them at our peril. If that is true then it needs to be heeded and shared. Jesus set out the truth, he shared his knowledge of God with all who would listen, he shared special insights with his friends and finally shared the symbols of his life with his dearest companions, even including the one who would commit the worst of their betrayals. Noone is excluded from his love, a love which would take him to a cruel cross outside the city as he died that we may all have life, life in all its fulness. So today we, even we, may come together identifying with the millions of the faithful who have gone before. We may share together, share the broken bread and sip the wine together rejoicing in the faith, confident in our God, and glorying in the wonderful adventure we call Life (with a capital L).

Chris Baker
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