Sermon for 3rd Sunday in Lent Year B

Readings: Exodus 20:1-17; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

When we think about the law we often picture lawyers in Victorian times, sitting in a small office surrounded by mountains of paper and big dusty books piled high from floor to ceiling. Often we imagine the lawyer quietly reading through a weighty tome and scratching an odd note or two with an old quill pen. Apart from the noise of the pen on the parchment, the office is silent, unless we imagine a big clock ticking slowly on the wall.

My lawyer is actually a woman and her office isn’t dusty at all, although the big books are still there

I wonder what picture we make in our minds when we try to imagine Moses receiving the 10 Commandments. Hopefully, it is a bit more dynamic and exciting than my picture of the Victorian lawyer sitting in his office. But whatever picture you have of Moses, I wonder how many of you imagine an earthquake, thunder and lightning, fire, smoke and a trumpet blast that we read about in Exodus 19.

I wonder how many of us remember the people were terrified and were told to keep off the mountain or else lose their life. No one had better get in the way of God delivering his Law to Moses.

So Moses received the Law on Mount Sinai on two tablets of stone. Scholars tell us that each stone contained the whole 10 Commandments; it was not that the first stone had 1-5 and the other 6-10. It was more like a contract you might sign – one copy for you and one copy for the other person. Here we had one tablet for God and one tablet for Moses.

So if that was the intention, why does Moses take **both** copies?

The reason is that God was going with Moses. God had promised Moses he would live among the people in the tent of meeting where Moses could come in and talk to him every day.

This is a very important point: the Bible is telling us that the Law was never intended to replace God or to be instead of God’s presence. The Law was always intended to help people understand what God wanted. It was never the intention to make the Law as important as God himself or to stop people talking to God.

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Despite the fear of stepping on the mountain and the concern for Moses having to go up Sinai to meet God, the Israelites soon forget their fear. They forget a lot of other things rather quickly too.

They quickly forget that God has rescued them from the Egyptians and brought them safely across the Red Sea. They forget God has fed them bread from heaven in the wilderness and meat from the flock of birds. They forget that God has given them water from the barren rock in the desert.

So when Moses seems to be taking a long time they quickly decide they can make a new god for themselves. They make a golden calf.

Perhaps this is a result of their fear. God can be a bit frightening. God demands we live a certain way and God can see everything about us and knows how well or how poorly we are doing that. It is much easier to have a god made of gold that just sits there and only needs the occasional polish.

People have tried to do that ever since – even when they have not realised that is what they have been doing. People have thrown God away and replaced God with lifeless idols. Things they can handle or own or manage. A living God is too frightening for them. Perhaps trying to follow a new teaching or philosophy is easier than living with an all-seeing God.

Sometimes people have even used their religion to replace God.

The Israelites did eventually throw the golden calf away and receive the 10 Commandments, but they weren’t very long before they found a way of using the 10 Commandments to keep God shut away in his tent of meeting, or locked inside his holy temple in Jerusalem.

They took the 10 commandments and made them into hundreds of commandments. The 10 Commandments became the books of Moses and all the host of rules and regulations we find in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. These were later expanded further with the Jewish Talmud with its 6.200 pages expanding the laws further and further. They can then tithe their cumin and mint from the garden, but cannot recognise God’s Messiah when he comes.

Christians have done the same sort of thing with statutes and rules. Some Protestants would claim that the Catholic Church has hidden God behind Mary and statues of the saints. Some Catholics would say the Protestants have sometimes done the same with the Bible, using church doctrines and biblical quotes to replace a more direct and frightening encounter with the living God. There’s a bit of truth in both observations.

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Yet Jesus breaks out of all our systems of control; Jesus refuses to be domesticated into a safe, manageable and ultimately lifeless artefact of our cultural heritage.

Jesus is the embodiment of all that the Law came to give – a signpost as to how God wishes us to live our lives – and yet Jesus is far more than the Law – he is the completion, the fulfilment, the satisfaction of all that the Law demands. Jesus is the Living Law that bids us follow him – not by woodenly quoting his words, or imposing rules and regulations upon ourselves, but by that living way which is love.

Jesus is the God who refuses to be locked up inside our tent of meeting, our holy temple, synagogue, church, Gurdwara or mosque. In Jesus, God refuses to be domesticated into a place, a book, a tradition, a formula of words or cultic practice.

Jesus is the God who has broken free from the temple and who is free again to blow where he wills, free to make his home in the heart of every believer, free to call each one of us his new, living temple.

The wisdom of the world is encapsulated in teachings, rules, systems, books and traditions, but none of them, however true they may be, whatever seed of life they contain, can embrace the infinite depth, breadth, mystery and sheer vitality of our Living God in Jesus Christ known through the power of the Holy Spirit.

As St Paul writes to the Corinthians:

“God in his wisdom made it impossible for people to know him by means of their own wisdom” (1 Cor 1:21).

The Greeks with their philosophical tradition sought wisdom, a new teaching.

The Jewish world sought visible manifestations of power to reassert their nationhood against Rome.

Yet God has given something more powerful than miracles and more profound than philosophy – God has given us a new meeting place for us to encounter directly the mystery of the Living God.

Instead of Sinai, the new mountain of God’s self-revelation is Calvary. Christ crucified cannot be reduced to law, teaching, system or cultic tradition – the dying, rising Christ transcends our ability to domesticate him – and in Christ the world meets face to face with the ineffable mystery of the Living God.

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