

The Lockdown commandments

Dr Lindsey Hall's Sermon for 7 March 2021

Third Sunday of Lent - Exodus 20:1-17, John 2:13-22

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 20:3 you shall have no other gods before me. 20:4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 20:5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, 20:6 but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Do you ever try and see how many of the ten commandments you can remember? Maybe you had all ten drilled into you at an early age. Or maybe you find the last six or seven easy to recall and the first two or three a bit more confusing. You shall have no gods before me and you shall not make for yourselves idols- I can never remember whether that's 1 commandment or 2 separate ones. Perhaps because, unlike the later commandments about murder, adultery and stealing, these seem to come from a different world.

In the ancient world, there were gods to choose from and different peoples named and honoured gods in different ways. The Jews were unusual for their belief in one God: Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. (Deut 6:4)

One God, who claims, in today's passage, to be a jealous God. A God who commands us not to put other gods first, or to make idols for ourselves.

Well so far so good with keeping the commandments! I don't believe in any other gods and I have never bowed to a golden calf, or worshipped the form of anything on the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth. So two out of two so far!

Our other reading today is John's account of Jesus overturning the tables in the Temple. This passage seems, instinctively, to have something in common with Moses receiving the ten commandments. Perhaps they are both moments in the life of a community when something was revealed to the people, when even those who already worshipped the one God were shown some of the ways in which they had lost

sight of God. The ways in which they gradually put other gods first and focussed their attention on idols.

No doubt the cattle and sheep sellers, the dove sellers and the money changers in the Temple would have assessed themselves as two out of two for the first couple of commandments. They were in the Temple and so were almost certain to be law observing Jews. But to the onlooker it might seem that they had lost their way a bit. Certainly, Jesus seemed to think so.

This incident is often referred to as Jesus cleansing the temple – purifying it from those who were making it something it was not meant to be. Those who were putting profit ahead of worship, those who had lost sight of what the temple was really for.

They hadn't built a golden calf or an idol for people to bow before. But they do seem to have developed a system through which you could buy favour with God; through which you could be made righteous. Through which you were being invited to put your hope in something other than the One God.

It's much easier to spot the ways in which people have wandered from faithfulness to God when those people are in a different place and culture and time. Much harder to notice all those things that we put our hope in that aren't God.

We have been through, and are in, an extraordinary time in this country and in the world. We have had challenges of restrictions, illness, loss, isolation, separation' - and for many of us believing in the promises of God, the Good News of Jesus and the resurrection hope has been essential to keep going.

But how do we notice when we have also hedged our bets on other gods? When we have constructed idols and then worshipped them?

How many times have you heard the word *normal* in the last year?

"I can't wait to get back to normal". "When things are back to normal we'll be able to..." "I want my normal life back". And then of course our questions about the new normal: "what will the new normal be like? Is this the new normal now, or is it going to change into something else? Will things ever seem normal again?"

As though normality - being normal - is the goal of our existence. As though the ideas of normal we have constructed should be pursued above everything else.

As though this bit of life is merely a disruption to be endured.

As though life is suspended until normality returns. As though God's kingdom is out of sight until we can see it again in more normal times.

I do not think any of the first disciples recognised in Jesus someone normal, and so chose to follow him. Quite the opposite.

And I do not think seeking normality is the same as seeking the kingdom of God.

The kingdom is not just for the good times, when the kids are in school and the shops and the pubs are open. It is for all times. And even in the midst of a pandemic, the kingdom of God is amongst us, it is in our midst.

But even in the places where it is named and celebrated, it is surprisingly easy to lose sight of the kingdom of God.

I wonder what you have learnt during lockdown? Maybe it's something you already knew that has become really clear, or maybe you have seen your community differently, learnt something new about what people are like, what matters to you, what's important.

One of the things we have noticed together as Christians we probably did already know but now see even more clearly: that our church is not the building but the people gathered around Jesus.

In your church community, like in mine, you have no doubt seen new gifts emerge this year. New ways of praying, connecting and serving that have been born out of the challenges we face.

These are testing times. And perhaps one of the greatest tests we face is how we seek the kingdom with the new revelations of this time. How we respond to things that before we saw dimly, but now can see clearly. What are we going to make of the choice we are presented with? Will we struggle to go back to something that no longer exists anyway, with all its flaws and familiarity; Or will we, together, seek a renewed church. Humbler, simpler, bolder. Focussed on seeking the Kingdom of God and joining with others to offer signs of the kingdom to a broken world.

Familiarity can get in the way of focussing on the kingdom. Do you think other people who went to worship in the Temple were offended by the traders and money changers in the Temple? Or had the sight of them and their practice had become so familiar, that it felt normal and there seemed no reason to question it?

What in our Christian life together have we stopped noticing, that Jesus might overturn? What in the familiarity of our patterns of worship, our use of buildings and the culture of our communities are we so keen to get back to that we are not stopping to ask is it because they are normal, or because they are truly a sign of the kingdom of God?

If we read Exodus, we can see why God instructed the people to have no other gods before the Lord their God, and not to make idols. They seem like good

commandments for people in a society where many gods were worshipped and who were known to build golden calves.

But they are good commandments for us too. Even in a time of crisis, even in a global pandemic they remind us not to seek our salvation in anything other than the Lord our God. Not in normality. Not in rushing back to the patterns of church we remember. Not in our desperate longing for the familiar. These things may well be good things, but they are not ultimately, our hope and our salvation. We find that only in the God made known to us in Jesus and in the kingdom which is already in our midst. Amen.

Dr Lindsey Hall

