

# People of the Covenant – Relationships with God and Neighbour

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## Exodus 20: 1–17; John 2: 13-22

JGMC 11<sup>th</sup> March, 2012 – Bryan Bothwell

Looking at today's topic, I can't say that it is impossible to have the second of these without the first, but I am certain that you *cannot* have the *first* without the *second*. The Bible seems singularly consistent that you cannot purport to have a relationship with God without also loving your neighbour, not to mention that extreme standard set by Jesus when He refined that to become, 'Love your *enemies*'. Throughout the Bible, Old and New Testaments, God stressed this point repeatedly, that no one can claim to love Him and to have put their trust in Christ the Saviour, if a change is not evident in the way they care for others. Long before Jesus remonstrated with them in the temple and they failed to recognise Him as both the ultimate sacrifice and the new temple that would provide real salvation, God had remonstrated He did not want sacrifices of animals but justice and mercy for one another. "He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. *Is that not what it means to know me?*' declares the Lord."<sup>1</sup> In other words, not only is it that 'to know me is to love me' but, in the case of God, it is 'to love me *and* your fellow humans', without borders; and with tangible expressions of your love for the poor, the lonely, the oppressed, the powerless and voiceless of society – *and* the unsaved.

Of course, *no where* does it teach that loving your neighbour, or even those who persecute you, can be an alternative to loving, following and serving, *God*, no matter how generous and widespread you are in casting your bread on the waters. The story of Ruth the Moab clearly shows the ability of a Gentile to be as committed to selfless love of another as the follower of God, though Ruth did also convert. And certain Samaritans were often held up by Jesus as infuriating examples to the Jews of how they should be too – but of course they originally shared the same Godly heritage. But an examination of this theme in the Bible undoubtedly reveals the critical link in what Jesus termed the two greatest commandments which summarised all the others we read this morning: 'love God with *all* your heart and soul and mind; and love others as you love yourself'. And clearly this was meant to emphasise that this was no slip of the tongue or mathematical impossibility – you can *indeed* love God with *all* your being ... and still love others. Indeed, the crux of the matter is that *unless* we love others, sacrificially, we do not really love God with our *all*. It is not about holding back some love so you can have some for your neighbour. It is about loving God *so fully* that the Living Water of His love *overflows* from us, *enabling* us to care for other people the selfless way Jesus does. And so, while it is not impossible for others to care tenderly

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<sup>1</sup> Jer. 22:16

and passionately for their fellow human, no one should be able to do this *better* than the Christian.

We may, however, sometimes do it *differently*, but without being judgemental or doing nothing. C S Lewis explained the genuinely beneficial difference there could be between the way the Christian responds to the needs of another and the way a 'good' non-Christian might do so. He said the non-Christian would see the person in need as a being who would live, say, 80 years if lucky and if his or her bodily needs were taken care of; so help them to enjoy that short lifetime the way they would like to. The Christian would see the person not only as a relatively short-lived body, but *also* as a *soul* which would have the opportunity to live for *eternity* in the blissful presence of God, if they can be helped to commit their life to Christ. So the Christian would be careful that in helping their physical desires, our help would be directed to securing that greater goal too.

But it calls for careful judgement, without abandoning the joyfulness of giving generously. Jesus did *not* say 'thank you for seeing me *hungry* and responding by preaching me a sermon'. As James put it, "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?" The same James, however, also ended his epistle with these words: "remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins." James certainly emphasised the need for action, often *practical* action in respect of material needs, or to lift the dignity of people by treating everyone equally, etc., in what he saw as the unarguable truth of Christian conviction. "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead", he memorably declared. But as his final words demonstrated, he too emphasised the absolute two-pronged nature of the Christian: love for God, love for people; and that that love must encompass both the needs of the body and, above all, the need of the soul to be *freed from sin through Christ, by Salvation from Christ, for communion with Christ* in that *ultimate relationship* without which all comes to nought.

Others use the symbolism of the cross, looking up, reaching out; we can perhaps extend this to an image of hanging on to God above so we can reach out to others and help them to be dragged up along with us.

In today's Scriptures we had two generally familiar texts, the Ten Commandments, and Jesus 'cleansing the temple', as it is often called. The Image of the *Angry* Jesus! Not something frequently seen – but this account is carried in all 4 Gospels, so it can't be avoided. *Jesus was angry*. What was it about this scene that made Jesus so angry? It is said that it helps to look at all 4 Gospels and combine their slightly different accounts, as each recounted the core story *as well as* what little other aspect they thought would be significant for their particular audience. So let's do that:

John recounted Jesus saying: “Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father’s house into a market!”

Matthew, Mark and Luke emphasised Him saying: “It is written, ‘my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’ but you are making/have made it a ‘den of robbers!’”

Blue = Matthew; **Differences:** Red = Mark; Green = Mark and Luke]

Even though John’s account is literally different from the three synoptic Gospels, the exasperation is clear in all 4. John simply uses the term “market” to capture what was going on, while the other three use the term ‘den of robbers’, quoting from Jeremiah 7; both emphasise what they saw as one point of Jesus’ condemnations, the *irreverent desecration of the temple*. Either one should be a frightening reminder to us in today’s world and today’s Cayman. To John it was enough to note that commerce had become such a *consuming* focus of the people that even worship was not sacrosanct any more, and the market had moved from outside, in the temple *grounds*, where it was supposed to have been, and taken over the temple *courts*. This was significant not only for desecrating the temple. It should be a warning to us as it should have been to the people of Jerusalem, that the people now felt that nothing should stand in the way of commerce, despite the first of the Ten Commandments we read today, just as many echo those voices of the market place now, that we need economic activity more than *anything* else.

St. Paul too warned repeatedly about such deep seated self-centredness of those who “think only about this life here on earth”, whose “god is their appetite” for material things. So here was the anger of Jesus reinforcing one point about our relationship with God – *nothing* should become more important than *that*. “You must not have any other gods but me”. Jesus undoubtedly had *passionate concern* for the humanness of people, but get your *priorities* right. I know you need nice things, He said, but “seek ye *first* the kingdom of God”.

In this same vein, that a right relationship with Christ, as today’s topic calls us to think about, means putting Him *before* everything else in our lives, the three other Gospels use, instead of “market”, the quotation “den of robbers”. That had a much wider connotation. It was quoted from Jeremiah 7: 9 – 11. There God condemned the Israelites for the *insincerity* of their *worship*, when they went off and broke various commandments in their daily lives and then thought they would be saved by coming on the Sabbath and standing before Him in His house, as if all were hunky dory. “Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you?” And it is important to note that in Jeremiah, God was not referring only to robbers. He had touched equally on most of the other nine Commandments too, including submitting to other ‘gods’, as when we give other things priority over God. So the Gospel writers are saying that the anger of Jesus is not only directed to people who physically desecrate His House, but desecrate it with *worship* that is all ritual and *means nothing to the worshipper*, who leaves without any contriteness of heart and begins the week anew with no

commitment to obey God. That is a timeless warning. So even if I could boast that I would never even sell you a ticket to a church dinner inside the Church, I would still be incensing Christ into *whipping anger* by flaunting His grace if I go out on the Monday morning doing as I please, with no integrity in living by His commands.

In ousting the 'den of robbers', Jesus was not contradicting His other statements of His purpose on earth, to save *sinner*s. Even before dying for us, Jesus went out of His way to show His love for sinners, deliberately befriending a lot of people that the religious community rejected as unsavoury characters. And He is still calling us who sin into the Church, into His house, His presence, to spend time with Him. But we need to note that He said He came to save sinners; not to provide a hideout, like the robbers den to which the robbers could run for a little respite from the law and then head back out to rob again, to continue living the same heartless life as before. That is the defining question as we contemplate this month's theme of what it means to be a covenant people. Am I safely standing in the *new temple*, Christ, *changed*, and therefore saved, by my faith? Basking in the *privilege* to be called a *child of God*, as St. John also wrote? That is the frightening reality of *whether or not* we have a relationship with God, as this morning's topic calls us to reflect upon. When God was leading the people of Israel into the Promised Land, He said He had set before them the choice of life or death<sup>2</sup>. Jesus came thousands of years later, God Incarnate, and reminded us again that the choice was, *as it still is today*, a matter of life or death: "... whoever *believes* in Him shall not perish but have *eternal life*. ... but whoever does *not believe* stands *condemned already* ..." <sup>3</sup>. When it is a life or death choice, eternal life or eternal death, we need to *choose wisely*.

Also, let us not overlook the fact that Jesus was there at the temple because He had gone to Jerusalem for the Passover Feast. This too was a direct command by God to the Israelites: "In *honour* of the *Lord your God*, celebrate the Passover each year ... in the month of Abib, for that was the month in which the Lord your God brought you out of Egypt ..." Honour the Lord by remembering He is your God and He saved you, that time in Egypt. And there were detailed instructions on how this was to be done and where. If those were viewed from the perspective of the *convenience* of the Israelite, the requirements were inconvenient and could be costly, financially. But there *are* certain things that are more important than that, even though in our age much of the whole 'commerce of life' is geared to making us focus on our individual convenience, and convincing us that it is worth paying a lot to avoid even little inconveniences. Just *how much* are we willing to pay? Is it just because I am getting old, or does anyone else also feel that our society is already paying too high a price to avoid the "inconveniences" in honouring the Lord in all we do and remembering in a special way what God did to save *us*, that time on the *Cross*? Paying too high a price and not even recognising it, as we obviously head toward moral and spiritual bankruptcy, grumbling

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<sup>2</sup> E.g. Deut.30: 19 etc.

<sup>3</sup> Jn. 3: 16, 18

all the way, but ‘*enjoying*’ the convenience of doing as we please. What portion of our society will be joining in Easter services, recognising as Jesus did the privilege of honouring and remembering God? How many will find it too “inconvenient” to interrupt a long weekend of sleep and ‘fun’, without a thought toward the Source of the gifts of life and of family?

It is a critical fact, though, that our Gospel text this morning is *also* related directly to the *second* part of our point of contemplation today, the status of our “relationship with our *neighbour*”, *other people*. And why that is inseparable from the question of our relationship with God, if we want to choose the option of *life*. I am not sure if there is any significance that only 4 of the Ten Commandments speak directly to our relationship with God but **6** concern our relationship with people. Or that the first of those 6 is to *honour our parents*. The front page headline of the Observer caught my eye the other day: “*Court-ordered parenting*”. Intrigued, I picked it up and the *first* sentence, quoting from a report on our criminal justice system, read: “*When it comes to keeping youngsters out of trouble, it’s all about the parenting.*” That is *one* idea that does *not* seem to have changed over the millennia. St. Paul emphasised that this honouring your mother and father is a two-way responsibility, quoting the commandment and *adding*, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger *by the way you treat them*. Rather, bring them up with the discipline and instruction *that comes from the Lord.*” Parents, by life style example as well as instruction, have to give their children *reason* to honour them. And children, as we all are, whatever our age, then *need to do so*. If we had got that right, there might be no need for the last 5 commandments, as the report on our criminal justice system intimated. But, when that bond is interrupted, for any reason, God assured us the peace and provision of His supernatural presence would still be there. *However*, God continuously called on the people of His covenant to also step in and help provide the various types of care both the child and the childless need, even temporary oversight.

I am so thankful John Gray has been blessed to offer the *sacrifices of care* like our afterschool programme and other ministries for the child as well as the parent, the aged and the alone. May we never weaken in this, and continue to hold fast to our faith in the God who will strengthen us to help lift up others to Him also.

So when John recalls Jesus’ anger being directed at greed gone mad, and Matthew, Mark and Luke recall His invocation of the imagery from Jeremiah 7 of unrepentant lawbreakers, they all recognised that Jesus was livid also about the harm being done to *people*. The Jeremiah passage could hardly have been more explicit: “... I will be merciful only if you stop your evil thoughts and deeds and start treating each other with justice; only if you stop exploiting foreigners, orphans and widows; only if you stop your murdering; and only if you stop harming yourselves by worshipping idols.”<sup>4</sup> Even in anger, God’s mercy shows through with his concern for the harm the exploiters were causing themselves, as well as for the exploited. As parents know, often when we get

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<sup>4</sup> Jer. 7: 5-6

angry with *our* children it is precisely because of the harm or risk we realise they are exposing *themselves* to by their actions, even if they are heedless of it. Some of the money changers and merchants in the temple were probably heedless of the harm they were causing to themselves, as well as their customers, because greed had become an *all consuming*, insatiable god of their lives. It is amazing how many things do *not* change over thousands of years, whether from the days of Jeremiah to Christ or to today's world. For some reason, godlessness, like lawlessness, any sin, does not stay neatly compartmentalised. Sin spreads. *Exploitation takes new forms*. Sooner or later those merchants would find that the extra profits squeezed out of the hapless worshippers are being eaten away by the surge in other forms of robbery, hiring more and more security guards, new taxes to support those who cannot afford to live, including children and women cast off from adulterous affairs and other aspects of covetous living, increased juvenile, police, prison and court facilities, the cost of trying to repair the despoiled environment, etc. Pretty soon they probably started noticing a fall off in those wealthier tourists who used to come to the temple every year making the biggest purchases, because the place had become so despoiled they wouldn't put up with it. And guess who is crying out the loudest to convert even more of the previously sacrosanct, as the so called *only way* to increase the revenues to make up for this shortfall!

It is important to remember that God is not against honest commerce, or doing well in it. He said people would need to work to live. Solomon and David did pretty well with earthly treasure. Lydia of Acts 16 fame, called the first European Christian, was a successful businesswoman whose house was spacious enough to accommodate Paul and his missionary companions. Jesus' friend Lazarus is said to have been wealthy too, but he opened *his* house to God, *not* used God's house for personal gain. It was when these merchants and bankers in the temple put commerce *ahead of everything else*, including God and His Commandments, that Jesus turned on them. They were breaking many of the Ten Commandments, *coveting* every penny the worshippers had, both *stealing* and *bearing false witness* with their prices. Scholars say that they were ripping off the tourists, with their extortionate prices for animals to be sacrificed, knowing the tourists *had* to buy because they could not bring their own animals with them.

And the bankers changing the foreign currencies were charging up to the equivalent of one day's wages as their profit, instead of the reasonable commission the Talmud actually allowed. (Actually, today's sub-prime engendered economic collapse had the same parallels, just so some greedy bankers in large financial temples in key world markets could extort higher than normal commissions from people who couldn't afford to pay, while the 'Sanhedrin' overseeing those temples also turned a blind eye. Maybe we just didn't notice Jesus bursting *that* bubble too, in 2008, but somehow things do get overturned when we ignore God's precepts too long.) And to top it all off, by turning the courts of the temple, where the gentiles and women were allowed to worship, into a

noisy market, these people could not worship properly, hence Mark quoting in full the Isaiah passage , “ ..a house of prayer *for all nations*”. Their greed was preventing other people from drawing nearer to God. They were harming others, materially *and* spiritually.

*Not* the way Christ expects to see the beneficiaries of His covenant behave. Not the kind of relationship the God of Justice will allow us to have with others if we want to come into His house and try to claim a saving relationship with the *living Temple*, ‘destroyed and raised up again in three days’, so that *all* who believe and repent may live.

God *urges* us to choose the option of *life abundant* that He offers - and that depends on our relationship with both God *and* neighbour. How will the integrity of my faith and *your faith* in God in Christ determine which we have chosen? Amen