

Exodus 19:3-7; 20:1-17

Today we turn to the big picture, applying the law in general, as we continue the journey to the Promised Land with the Israelites. The book of Exodus is a mixture of very early oral material which has come from different traditions and has been knit together into a single book. All these events are pivotal to their faith and its development. Just as we have four gospels telling us about Jesus, so the Jews have different memories of the same events. We have four different, individual gospels, but in the book of Exodus, the traditions and stories are all mixed and intertwined in the same book which can make for a difficult and confused reading. For example, Moses goes up and down the mountain several times and at times we're not sure if he is actually up or down.

It is worth noting the purpose of law given by a God to people in the ancient world, in which case the Israelite law was no different than the other law in its day. Law was not simply a means to limit and direct human behaviour so that equity and justice may be experienced by all and peace might prevail.

Law always had a theological aspect to it. In many ancient reliefs, a form of sculpture or carving, a high god is seen giving the codes of law to the reigning monarchs. Law was always thought as being of divine origin and was intended to order human society so that it functioned in a way consistent with the divine will and the ordering of the whole cosmos. In other words, law was seen as part of creation itself. Just as there were

‘natural’ limits and behaviours set within the cosmos itself, so law set these limits within human society. And, just as creation was intended to offer life to all, so law was given so that people may prosper in a long life.

The Law becomes an instrument of mutual relationship as the faith of the people responds to the love and grace of God. It is that understanding behind the torah that gives life to its observance. It is a lack of understanding of that torah in that particular sense – that leads some Christians to say it is purely ‘legalistic’, and does not reveal a God of grace, as known by Christians. That could not be further from the truth.

We need to keep in mind that the Ten Words of Commandments were edited and updated by at least three different compilers, according to the conditions of the Israelite people following the Exile in Babylon. This exile happened about five hundred years after the Exodus. Up to the exile, there were no written records, not of the exodus, not Adam and Eve, not Noah, nor Abraham and Sara, not Isaac, Jacob, not Joseph and his brothers. The stories were preserved strictly through oral tradition, thus the inconsistencies and mixed narratives.

The Exodus narrative begins with God introducing ‘himself’, but not as creator of the universe, but as the one who has rescued the people from slavery in Egypt – quite appropriate for a people in exile. The ‘Ten

Words' begin with a concern about God. It is only after that, that concern shifts to matters of human interaction. The first concern is the relationship between God and humanity, and then the relationships within humanity.

The commands, or teachings, were given so that people may live fully together before God. They were not given so that people may be worthy to come into God's presence. On the contrary, they are given after God liberated his people from Egypt and led them through the wilderness.

Law, or Torah, in the Old Testament, is always a way to live in the presence of the gracious God who first comes to us in our despair and need. They are also a reminder that living in the presence of this God brings responsibility toward God – and toward all God's creation. Law was a way of helping God's people live such a life. The Torah was not dismissed by Jesus who lived as a faithful Jew. When Jesus was asked: "Which commandment is the most important of all?" Jesus answered, "The most important is: '*Listen, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.*' The second is: '*Love your neighbor as yourself.*' There is no other commandment greater than these."

We need to remember that God's grace happened before any requirements were set out in Exodus. It is expected that in response to

God's saving acts, people will WANT to respond and stay in relationship. God identifies Godself as belonging to the people. "I am the Lord your God." The Hebrew word, Torah, is often translated as law which can be a negative quality for many people. Torah is more about teaching and the commandments are positive instruction to enable the people both to stay in relationship with God, and to behave in right ways with each other. The law and story are not separate entities, but an integrated whole.

It is God who is the subject which enables us to see more clearly that the law is a gift and not some deliberate hardship. It is interesting to reflect that if we all lived by grace treating each other based on our relationship with God, we would not need any laws at all. But, that is simply wishful thinking.

Most modern colonial and post-colonial governments are based on the premise of land ownership. People, generally, and governments specifically, are understood to "own" and "control" the land on which they reside. It is part of the North American Dream for a single family to own a small plot of land on which they can build and maintain a home.

However, in our Scriptures today, God has something else in mind. God tells Moses and the Israelites, whom he has just freed from slavery in Egypt, that they are to be God's "treasured possession". God continues, "the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and

a holy nation". To be priestly is to mediate blessings from God to others. Those blessings are for God's own people, but also for the "whole earth", an earth that also belongs to God. As the people of God, we must recognize that our mission field is not just "us" but also "them", not just our own "nation" but the "whole earth".

When God later delivers them to the promised land, God does not give the Israelites land to own, to preside over and do with as they will, but rather land, and all that is in it, as a trust. They are to be stewards of this great possession that is first and ultimately, the possession of God the Creator alone.

The story of the Israelites' Exodus and acquisition of the Promised Land can and has been read as a narrative of conquest, and in our post-colonial world, it is important that we acknowledge and resist this misunderstanding. At the same time, threatened as we are by both the domination of people and the domination of natural resources, it is equally important that we also hear the call to resist the narrative of ownership and domination as a whole.

As Christians, what would it mean to truly believe that we own nothing – that everything we have is not only a gift from, but truly still the possession of God the Creator? To believe that we, too, are such a "treasured possession"? What would it mean to live accordingly?

Exodus reminds us of what we as human beings have in common with the land and all of its resources. We are all both creations and possessions of the eternal God. In light of this, as we recognize and respond to our own needs and desires, making claims on the land as a result, we must also recognize the land as possessing its own distinct claims, dignity, and integrity. Rather than effacing these by subjecting the land to the unrivalled claims of our human mastery, possession, and control, a theology recognizing our status as “treasured possessions” of God in our own right might respond to this trust that God has placed in us by honouring and upholding the integrity of the land as its inhabitants.

So often we wander through life; we lose ourselves, our destination, our God; yet God seeks again to call us, to enfold us within a community of fellow travellers, to provide us with a place and a way of living, and to say, *“This is what you were made for.”*

Having been introduced to two covenants, the first with Noah, and then Abraham, we follow the great saga of Israel’s founding myth in the Old Testament, through the Sea of Reeds, through the wilderness to the receiving of the Ten Commandments. This is a point of high drama and significance in the Exodus narrative and indirectly introduces us to the third great covenant between God and Israel, established at Mt Sinai.

Liberated from slavery in Egypt, crossing the Sea of Reeds, the Israelites set out into the wilderness. The people have encountered thirst and

hunger, and God has provided sweet water and bread or manna from heaven. They have been attacked and have been victorious, and finally reach Sinai. There, God makes a covenant with Israel: Israel will be God's treasured possession, a priestly kingdom and a holy nation, if the people keep their end of the covenant. Here, unlike in the covenants with Noah and with Abraham, a mutual covenant is established: Israel must follow God's commands if they are to remain God's people.

Our Scripture begins to delineate those commands with the Ten Words, and in doing so continually points us back to Israel's formative narratives, reminding the text's hearers and readers that they are a part of the story of God's intention for humanity that began so long ago. The covenant at Sinai is patterned after a suzerainty treaty, in which a suzerain (king or lord), lists the good things that he has done for his vassal, lists stipulations the vassal must obey, and promises reward for that obedience. So God begins by identifying Godself as the one "who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery", displaying like a suzerain God's beneficence toward the people.

Theologically, however, this assertion also functions to remind the people of who **they** are: they are precisely the ones whom God delivered. The "steadfast love" that God shows to the thousandth generation recalls the same words in the song of Moses, (*By your loyal love you will lead the people whom you have redeemed*); you will guide them by your strength to your holy dwelling place, again serving as a

reminder of God's identity as liberator and their own as divinely liberated. Reaching farther back, the commandment to "Honour your father and mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you", recalls the mother and father of the multitudes to whom that land was first promised.

The God who appeared to Abraham and Sarah is the same God who appears to Moses now, and the people are those who bear Abraham and Sarah's names. The narrative even remembers the creation of the world. The language of "heaven above", "earth beneath", and "water under the earth" recalls the same language in the first creation narrative. The God who separated those waters at the creation is the only god who is worthy of worship. The commandment to remember the Sabbath overtly refers to the first creation narrative. In resting on the seventh day, the people are in fact doing what God did. In these ways, the story demonstrates that God is the creator and that the people are the created, and that the harmony and order that God established in creation is once again established through God's law in the community of the Israelites.

The Ten Words are divided in commands regarding worship and commands governing human relationships. But the two emphases are better understood as intertwined throughout. Laws concerning proper worship of God are also about how the people are formed through that worship to be a certain kind of people. Laws concerning how people are

to relate to one another are also about living as God requires, even doing as God does. The Ten Words and the books of law that follow, are meant to form Israel as a sacred community, a community rooted in right worship of God, and living in justice and peace with one another. The Israelites are to live as neighbours to one another, the foundation of which is knowing the God to whom they belong.

It's clear that, even though God never announces to Moses where he's being led, Sinai is the destination in this part of the book of Exodus. The ultimate destination for the Israelites, of course, is Canaan, the land that God promised to Abraham. But leading up to the Israelites' arrival at Sinai, the narrative keeps pointing us in the direction they "came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai". God stands on Horeb (Sinai) when Moses strikes water from the rock.

Sinai has been the place to which God has been leading all along, and not just from the escape from Egypt. The whole journey, from creation forward, has been leading to this place. It is at Sinai that God shows the Israelites the harmonious world in which they're meant to live, and calls them to live in it. It is as if God is saying, "*This* is what you were made for. You were not made to wander, to be afraid, to hunger and thirst, to be lost. You were made to live in this community of justice, in right relationship with your God. Stay true to these commandments, and this is where you will remain."

Of course, we don't stay true, so Sinai serves as a signpost, ever reminding us of the sacred community for which we are made, and calling us back to it.

According to legend, before Moses went to the top of Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, he spoke to the people. "I need you all to accept a gift without first knowing what it is. I'm going to go to the top of this mountain and I am going to receive the gifts of the commandments that will make us God's people. But before we can receive this gift we need to make an acceptable offering. What should we give as our offering?"

Someone in the crowd suggested silver. They each gave Moses a piece of silver which he put in a bag and carried with him as he disappeared up to the top of the mountain. Later he returned with the bag of silver. "God didn't want the silver. What should we give him?"

The people thought about it and someone suggested they all give God their best lamb and that Moses sacrifice them at the top of the mountain. So they all brought Moses their best lambs and Moses disappeared up the mountain leading them. Later he returned with the lambs. "He didn't want the lambs either. What is the best offering we can give God in exchange for the commandments?"

The crowd was silent. Everyone was stumped. Finally a woman in the

crowd who was nursing a baby, spoke up. “The most important and most valuable thing we have is our children. As our offering to God, we should promise that we will teach these commandments to our children.” So Moses disappeared once more up the mountain. This time carrying nothing but the promise that whatever God commanded they would teach their children to obey. Later he came down from the mountain carrying two stone tablets. Inscribed on them were God’s gift of the 10 Commandments.

We cannot dismiss the ‘Ten Words’ as no longer relevant to our time and our lives. This so-called Law, was given as a gift of grace from a God who from the time of creation sought a relationship with the creatures he created. This law is a blueprint, guiding us in our formation of a relationship with this loving, gracious God. It is there to help us become a sacred community, a community rooted in right worship of God and living in justice and peace with one another.

Amen.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

God of the commandments, you gave the Israelites laws so that they might live in harmony with one another. Show us how to live in peace, so that all may know of your love. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. **Amen.**