

## **Sermon    How will they know us?**

“Now, Israel, hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you,” says Moses in our reading from Deuteronomy, “Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you.” (4:1)

In modern times it’s easy to focus on the part about land and start discussing the modern state of Israel and arguing about its relations with the Palestinian peoples.

But listen to it carefully: hear the decrees and laws [...] Follow them so that you may live ...

From which we can infer that if they don’t follow - obey - the laws – all the laws – then they will die.

Which is a bit scary.

While the ‘law’ in the Jewish context, typically refers to the first five books of the bible, the law of the Lord in this context refers to the laws set out in Leviticus, and specifically to the law given to the people of Israel by God at Mt Sinai, that we typically refer to as the ten commandments.

You know the story: The Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, they cried out to God, God acted, and Moses led the nation of Israel out of Egypt into the wilderness. Moses went up Mount Sinai, and was given the ten commandments by God, and Moses delivered those commandments to the people.

Think about the timing: The people cried out to God. God saved the people. God gave the people the commandments. The commandments came after the saving. And that is something that is often missed. When people say the commandments do or should apply to all people, not just Christians (and Jews), or that they are the basis of human society, they’re missing that sequence. The commandments weren’t given to all of creation, they were given to the nation of Israel, only after God had saved them.

In fact, the commandments, and the development of the laws we see in the book of Leviticus follow on from that, have the effect of setting apart the nation of Israel from the other nations of the world. At its heart, the law is about honouring God and about living together, and as a result, being set apart as the people of God.

The nation of Israel was to keep the Sabbath, while the other nations kept working. The nation of Israel wasn't to eat pork, but other nations did. The nation of Israel was to free slaves after seven years, other nations did not. The nation of Israel was clearly different from the nations around them.

That is what it meant to be God's people, in that ancient context. To be living the way that God wanted them to live, and living in such a way that all the other peoples of the world would see it.

Humans, I think, have a love-hate relationship with laws and rules. We love them when they help us, we hate them when they cause us problems – when they become inconvenient. Or when we accidentally break them. Or when we not-so-accidentally break them too. We love them when they apply to other people. But we're not always so happy when someone wants to apply them to us.

I think we see so much of that at the moment, in this Covid lockdown. We watch television news and see people defying the rules and we see others getting angry at them. But surely, we think, it shouldn't apply to us, because we're vaccinated. Or I'm only going to do this particular thing. Or only for a short time. Or whatever it might be.

One of the ways that we seem to deal with this, is to make the rules more complex. Add exceptions. Add special cases. You shall do no murder. Perfectly clear, isn't it? Don't kill anyone. Easy. But what about capital punishment? What about self defense? What if it's saving someone else from being killed? What if it's an accident? And so on.

Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. So don't work on the sabbath. But rabbis have to. What if someone needs medical assistance – well, the doctor needs to work. And so on.

A few years ago, my mother bought a refrigerator with a Sabbath setting, although she didn't realise it had a Sabbath setting until after she bought it - she's not Jewish, so it wasn't a particular selling point. What's a Sabbath setting? Well, in the Jewish tradition, keeping the sabbath day holy was originally extended to not lighting fires, which then became 'no sparks' in the electrical era, and therefore no turning electric lights on. And when you open the fridge door, the light turns on... so a devout Jewish person will, before sunset on Friday, flick the Sabbath switch on the fridge, and that will stop the light coming on when the door is opened.

It makes sense. All these things make sense, in that they're logical developments in living with the laws. And it's not just with God's commandments, we make our laws more and more complex over time. Have you read the tax act lately? Or what about the regulations of the Uniting Church in Australia?

The organisation I worked for many years ago moved buildings, and, as was appropriate the new building had a security system to safeguard our assets and our people. Everyone needed a four digit security code to open the doors. And to make it easy, you could choose your own. Of course, if you chose one that somebody else had already chosen, you got to choose a different one.

You may have spotted the flaw: If that happened, you then knew two codes - your own, and the one you chose originally. Most people chose dates, and given that there were about a hundred people in the building, and 365 days in the year... about one in four dates chosen at random would open the doors.

It gets worse: when the building was broken into on a weekend and computers taken, it was discovered that the system only stored the last 200 numbers in memory anyway. So, by the time everyone had arrived on Monday, visited the bathroom and/or gone to the tea room – which were outside the secure area – the record of whatever number used for the break in had been lost.

And then, being human, we addressed the problem: security cameras were installed, but the areas near the doors were too dark, and only silhouettes were visible. So we addressed that problem with motion detecting lights which came on as people approached the door. They were quite bright, so instead of silhouettes we got pictures of people covering their eyes.

Eventually, we got swipe cards.... We do try, as people, as companies, as churches, as societies, to create systems and rules and laws which are perfect. And we fail. We hear of people exploiting loopholes, of getting off on technicalities, or missing out because of the bureaucracy, and of falling through gaps in the system.

The problem is, as adding complexity, we lose sight of why the laws are there in the first place. We become obsessed with the detail, and not the purpose. And the natural consequence of that is coming to the view that it's obeying the laws that's makes us part of God's family, rather than obeying the laws because we are part of God's family.

So in our reading from Deuteronomy we heard Moses warn the people against adding to the laws: Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you. (4:2)

Whether we simply ignore God's law or complicate it or bury it under a mountain of regulation and red tape, we can drift away from following God's law and from God. And there are terrible consequences when we drift away from God. There's that famous saying: The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

We may not like to talk about it, but Moses tells us that we need to follow God's decrees and laws so that we may live... and again, left unsaid is the fate that awaits those who don't follow God's decrees and laws.

And yet, it's common wisdom that the Christian life is not about obeying rules, so what does what Moses is saying mean for us today?

Moses puts it to the people like this: See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." (4:5-6)

Following God's decrees isn't about making God happy. The people weren't being asked to follow God's decrees in order to please God or find favour with God – after all, God was already their God! God had already rescued them from slavery in Egypt! They were already en route to the promised land! They were already God's chosen people.

By observing God's decrees and laws carefully, says Moses, it will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations.

Wow. By doing what God wants them to do, the people of Israel will show God's wisdom and understanding to all the other people – and they will be impressed; they will say "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people".

They will be witnesses to God, simply by doing what God wants them to do. That's how they will be known.

Does that remind you of anything?

How about John 13:34-35 [Jesus says] “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” And you know what comes next? “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Again, it’s a command. Jesus is telling his disciples what they must do. And again, the point isn’t simply to make Jesus happy, to give him warm and fuzzy feelings, it’s to witness to people: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples”. That’s how they will know us.

People sometimes talk of the harsh and vengeful God of the Old Testament and the kind and loving God of the New – but as we read the scriptures – the Old and the New Testaments – we see God’s amazing consistency. Remember Hebrews 13:8 – Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.

And while we might favour the kind and loving part, there is also judgement across the Old and New Testaments – there is a consequence to turning away from God – from not living as God wants us to live. Moses is clear on that in this reading from Deuteronomy. At the beginning of the New Testament, John the Baptist was big on judgement... but it certainly didn’t end there.

In Matthew’s gospel we read “[...] he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

“He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.” (Matt 25:41-46)

There is a consequence for not living the way God wants us to live. A consequence of not keeping God’s commands and decrees.

But when we do keep those commands and decrees, we are witnesses to God. That’s how they will know us. Moses asks the people “What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us

whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?" (4: 7-8).

Try as we might, though, to do the right thing, to follow God's commands and decrees, we know we will fail – maybe sometimes, maybe often. We will do the wrong thing. We will be weak. We will give in to temptation. We will take the easy options. And sometimes we won't even realise that we are doing the wrong thing.

Paul puts it so well in his letter to the Romans (3:23): for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

But in his grace has provided us with a way for us to be restored: Jesus. We read in the letter to the Colossians: "God has forgiven us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands; this God set aside, nailing it to the cross." (Colossians 2:13-14)

In Jesus death, he took on the consequence of our turning away from God on himself. Not because of what we did – and certainly not because we were diligently obeying the law, but because he loved us.

And the right response to that love is to do our best to live the way God wants us to live. To follow God's decrees and commands, and by doing that, be a witness to God's grace wherever we may be. Jesus calls us to love others – that's how others will know us.

If you were to approach a non-Christian and ask them what Christians were like, do you think they'd say "Oh yes... Christians all love each other"? I think they'd probably say something else – maybe something about being 'good people' if we were lucky, but more likely that they'd say Christians were wowsers or disapproving or judgmental or worse.

But we need to remember that God's law isn't there so that we can earn our way to God, and neither is it there for us to judge others either... But neither are God's laws simply guidelines or good ideas, and they're not there for us to pick and choose from either.

Because God's decrees and commands show us how God wants us to live, and they enable us to be witnesses to God in the world.

Let's ask ourselves how will they know us?

We mustn't be complacent; let's take the words of Moses to heart:

Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them. (4:9)

To the glory of God.

Amen.