

**Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2024**

**Exodus 20.1-17**

**1 Corinthians 1.18-25**

**John 2.13-22**

In our Lent conversations this week we have been thinking about “proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom” – in other words how we tell others about the love of God and the forgiveness that God offers and how we help them to come to know that this is a free gift – we have to do nothing to obtain it apart from asking. This gospel – or good news (that is what the word gospel means) really is **good news** and its free. The very best news,

But the message that God’s love is freely available to all is a difficult one for many to hear. We are not used to things that cost us nothing. Perhaps there is suspicion or disbelief. Maybe we think we just don’t deserve it. There is that well known expression – there is no such thing as a free lunch. And this gospel – this good news about Jesus - is not so much a free lunch as a free banquet!

We sometimes use the phrase “counter-cultural” to describe the Christian gospel, meaning that at its very heart it goes against the ways of the world around us. And right the way through scripture and well illustrated in our Bible readings today we can see this idea that the gospel, the good news of Jesus, is all about turning the expectations of the world on their head.

Our Old Testament reading is of course the ten commandments, we probably know them as the Thou Shalt Nots. Or we know them as rules for living; rules that marked out the Jewish nation; rules which people measured themselves against. But Jesus even turns these on their heads.

The trouble with rules like these – thou shalt not – is that its all too easy to justify ourselves. I have never murdered anyone we could (I hope) all say. But Jesus turns this around when he says (for example) *you have heard that it was said “you shall not murder” but I say to you if you are angry with a brother or sister you will be liable to judgement.* That throws a somewhat different light on things.

There is also the story of when a rich man came to Jesus and asked what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus reminded him of the commandments as we heard them today. The man said he had kept them all since birth – he sought to justify himself – but Jesus told him to sell all he had and give it to the poor. In other words, think not so much about what you haven’t done, what laws you haven’t broken – think rather about what good you could do; what love you could show.

The gospel seeks not so much to limit our wrongs but rather to open up new and wonderful opportunities to live as God wants us to live. And there is always more we can do. We can always show more love. There is no limit to love.

Our NT reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians again shows this topsy turvy nature of the Kingdom. The cross – the central message of the gospel – is, Paul says - *nonsense to those who are being lost; but for us who are being saved it is God's power*. He continues – *(it is) a message that is offensive to the Jews and nonsense to the Gentiles*

Paul knew this all too well. He himself was a well educated and learned man and he knew all about wise words – human wisdom. But his encounter on the Damascus Road with Jesus made him realise that human wisdom was very different from what God was offering. Through what Jesus did on the cross God offers us new life and a new relationship with him. This is not about learning things or studying things – its about accepting a gift and enjoying it. It seems foolish to the world but it brings us life in its fulness.

One of the things we all agreed on at the Lent conversations was that it is often hard to talk to people about what we believe, about the good news that comes through Jesus. Perhaps this passage in 1 Corinthians can help us understand why. To those who live by this world's standards the gospel is nonsense. It is something for nothing and does not make any sense. The gospel - God's wisdom - seems like foolishness. The good news of Jesus turns things on their head again.

And the gospel reading from John's gospel tells the story of Jesus literally turning something over. The tables of the money changers in the temple.

The temple was the holiest place – the place where God dwelt amongst his people. The place where the people would come to worship God, to pray and to be in God's presence. And yet it had become more concerned about obeying the various rules of worship than the worship itself. The money changers were an example of this. Money had to be exchanged into treasury coinage to purchase animals that could then be sacrificed. For the Jews did not want the sacrificial animals to be purchased with coins which contained the image of Caesar – so they insisted that they were changed to the temple money which contained no such images. The coin that was used to buy the animal to be used in worship mattered more than the worship itself.

This was happening in the outer court of the temple – known as the court of the Gentiles because this was the place where non Jews could come to worship – the Gentiles' place of prayer had been transformed to a place where animals were being sold for sacrifice and money changing tables had been set up. Jesus could see that this meant that gentiles were being excluded; that they were being squeezed out of the very place which was given for them to worship God. That

the Jews were failing in their mission to show God to the whole world; instead insisting on the purity of their own race and rituals to the exclusion of others. This is emphasised in the quotation that Mark attributes to Jesus in his gospel account of the incident – *My house shall be called a house of prayer **for all the nations**; but you have made it a den of robbers.*

But the incident had broader meaning. The money changers and animal sellers were quite likely making fat commissions and charging high prices. The monopoly they had established enabled them to put up the price. The poor were being exploited as they came to worship God. Access to God even for Jews was being denied. Poor people were being excluded too.

Jesus is saying – what I am about; what my mission is; what the new thing I have come to do is – is to open up the gates for everyone to access God, not through a system of laws and purification rituals, but through the one off sacrifice of the life of the perfect one, of Jesus himself. And this is free. There is no sacrificial animal to buy; no money to change. The price is paid once for all – the gift of salvation through Jesus is free to all. This good news, this life in its fullness is for everyone regardless of wealth, status or race.

And this still holds today. The gospel is for all – poor, rich, black, white, gay, straight, male, female. All people have the opportunity to relate to God in this new way; have the opportunity for the Saviour to be present in their lives, and transform their lives; have access to this free gift which is offered.

So this leaves us all with important questions to think about for our church and for ourselves .

Firstly our church – are there times when we put things in the way of the gospel, the good news, the free gift which God offers. I think we have made huge strides forward here. I know that the welcome we give to young and old is generous and open; I know we re always on the lookout for new comers and willing to embrace them and help them. But I wonder if there are still times when people to act in certain ways and place more emphasis on this than on the sharing of the good news?

And then ourselves, are our lives about obedience to rules to justify ourselves; are they about human wisdom - the things we know and the reputation we have, or are we willing to accept the free gift of the gospel. To accept what Jesus has to offer. Love, forgiveness, the possibility of a new life, life in all its fulness. Are we going to live by this world's standards or will we follow Jesus. Are we going to put Jesus where he wants to be – and as we thought about last Sunday – at the centre of our lives? And are we willing and ready to share that good news with the people we meet day by day?