

The law of human nature

Exodus 20: 1-4,7-9,12-20; Matthew 21: 33-46, The parable of the Tenants Rev J Shannon

Last week, I shockingly asked, 'did the people in the desert want the ten commandments?' and I said 'no!' which is true, it is in our nature NOT to be told what to do; NOT to be pushed around ...but it is also in our nature to WANT order and structure and rules so where there is none, humans will make some up.

Life with God and life in the community are the related themes in the readings today. "The text draws attention to a reality that is foundational in the biblical proclamation." That is, finding peace with God and finding peace with one's neighbours are essentially different parts of the same battle. There comes a time when we, **you**, can't have one without the other.¹

Move people into a new townhouse or apartment and the first thing they will do is create bi-laws about parking; using the gym, visitors and a host of other things from the practical, such as how many pets can one person own, to the bazaar. My uncle lived in one of those fancy places where you could berth your 60ft 2-bedroom yacht right outside your townhouse...but no one was allowed to sleep in it. If you untied it, moved 2 metres away and dropped anchor, they had no control.

And everywhere, we have rules – we have Pharisees. A neighbour who has taken it upon themselves to document our discretions. Am I right?²

The purpose of the 10 commandments was to point everyone in one direction – towards God AND to build peace in the community so there would be no distractions. You can see how tightly linked these things are.

The purpose of the law is to create harmony and protect the vulnerable. That is a social construct specifically for humans. Nature has no such laws. Nature's laws are more about equipping creatures for the best possible chance of survival while acknowledging every living thing has a purpose for another living thing. They have been created for each other and that does not necessarily as we might like it.

Humans, as God created us – are a bit of both. We are in competition with each other for resources (the best mate, the best house, the best job) AND we are social creatures responsible to – and dependent upon, each other for survival. We feel both antagonistic and loving about our fellows. We are at war within ourselves. Something

¹ Adapted from *Texts for Preaching Year A*, Brueggemann, Cousar et al, p.505

² The police were put in the uncomfortable position of enforcing health regulations and that was not well received.

the Buddhists recognised long ago.³ But the difference between humans and other creatures is that we have a 'God spot': an inbuilt appreciation and desire for the divine. Where that is not fulfilled – we make that up too!⁴

To the rabble out in the desert with Moses, the gaggle of unrelated tribes with different traditions and religious practices, the 10 commandments played a crucial role in the forming of God's people. It is a consummation of the covenant, the relationship between God and the people. Not to be too flippant but think of it as building a new apartment building. This was the basis that would bring them together, focus them and forge that union, the bond between Yahweh and the people. This is the point where they are set apart – as God's people. The one's from THIS new address.

The implications and the ramifications are extraordinary. The 10 commandments, the greatest gift, has shaped our theology, our modern-day laws, our discourse and even our literature for 1000s of years. They were intended – and have, shaped human life in every aspect. The 10 commandments gave the people in the desert structure and agency to create the harmony that would bring them closer to God. One of the things that Jesus did was show that when you strip the 'legal language' from the commandments, all the do's and don'ts, they are seen to be ideals of a person's most positive nature. It is simply, love God unreservedly and love your neighbour as yourself. If you do that, everything else falls into place.

The endless battle between human nature and the divine will never go away. In religious terms it is the good and the evil that dwells in all of us⁵. Our good nature and our selfish nature are at various degrees according culture, upbringing, our community and our personality.

So much of our interpersonal conflict is because the level of these spirits; these temperaments, are at a different degree from what we believe they should be. Sometimes we are the pharisees pushing our standards on others and sometimes we are the spirit engaging the better side of others.

I used to run a post graduate management course for the Chinese Scholarship Council sponsored senior executives from various universities across China. We would mix course work with site visits to universities both rural and urban. Each year I would greet a new group of executives and on our first field trip, someone inevitably would say, "Australia is so clean!". Then they would see the 'don't litter' signs and ask me

³ Buddhism predates Christianity by about 600 years. There were Buddhist missionaries visiting the middle east! Although there is no evidence of Buddhist influence on Christian theology.

⁴ See next week's reading about the golden calf

⁵ Some Christian theologians call this our original sin.

how big was the fine? Surely only a very high fine would keep people from littering. When I said the fine was only \$250, there was disbelief. This would always lead into a conversation about why most Australians don't litter – the whole 'do-the-right-thing' mentality...and they would be somewhat in awe. They would not take my word for it and often asked other people the same question – and got the same answers. Ultimately, they would conclude, this attitude would never work in China...yet, I noticed, right from the beginning, they never littered while they were here.

It may have been out of respect. It may have been not wanting to spoil a relatively pristine environment but honestly, I think that social and spiritual nature, geared towards harmony, automatically, subconsciously, takes on what is 'normal'. In this case, it was the good side of Australian culture that had an impact. I don't for a minute believe they didn't litter because of the law.

I haven't really touched on the parable. That is explained in *Grace before law*. I urge you to go and read it. But what I will say is Jesus told this parable to demonstrate while law is important, what is written on our hearts is more important. Love God and love thy neighbour. There will always be a point where we have to decide whether to do things right, or, do the right thing. This parable turns the expected upside down because Jesus wanted to illustrate a higher purpose and a higher power. And make no mistake, Jesus was talking to the Pharisees- to the righteous who wanted to impose human rules and expectations. Even generosity comes with strings attached. (see next week's parable of the wedding feast)

And here I will quote the last paragraph of that sermon:

"Jesus demonstrates the difference between God's law and human law. God's grace goes before the law. The door to transformation, reconciliation or redemption remains open. Always. There is always a chance for change.

In a recent pod cast, I asked 'who is the person or people around which you are your best self?' The readings today tell us – Who? with God, first.

And I finished that old sermon with this prayer...

*God of thunder and God of love, God of creation and Jesus heart – As long as I live on this earth, I will be challenged – not between right and wrong (that's easy) but between right and right. Guide my heart in God's law and my head in human rules and give me the wisdom to know HE trumps. Amen"*⁶

⁶ Grace before law, 4 Oct 2020, www.merimbulaunitingchurch.com.au

