

Epiphany 6A
February 13th, 2011
The Rev'd Sheelagh Clarke

Love, Walk, Observe.

All week I have been trying to help my daughter with her first research paper. It's not easy when you have been out of school for thirty some years and of course, according to her, nothing I know is of any merit at all. All week I have been suggesting making little cards to group ideas together and this Gospel feels that someone gathered together lots of quotes and labeled them "Commandments."

This Gospel isn't very easy reading either. No nice vistas on the hillside today, no "Truly I tell you" or voices from the heavens. No, just dry bits of text that are not even really connected. Just dry bones really. But dry bones make good soup. So I guess we are going to have to work with this today.

The passage from Deuteronomy sets the stage. "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess." This is the covenant from God; from God to his chosen people. At the heart of it is an invitation; an invitation to choose to be with God, to love Him, to choose life and prosperity, against the bleakness of death and adversity. This covenant, this promise, is two way. God invites, we respond; loving, walking and observing his commandments. Well we know that the Hebrew people found it hard to stay on track, we know that they strayed, ducked, dived, made false idols and lost their faith, with a fair amount of grumbling as they went, just as we do.

It seems to me that the commandments we asked to observe provide a blueprint for the sanctity of relationships. The Ten Commandments offer us a touchstone; a moral and ethical code. They are focused on what preserves our relationship with God, and what will prevent us from irreparably damaging our relationships with one another. Thou shalt not kill, bear false witness, thou shalt not covet.

Take this apocryphal example: Weekends for this one man comprised a collection of little pleasures. He would wake, put on the coffee, and put the bagel in the toaster and go out to fetch the weekend edition of the paper. But on one occasion when he got the mailbox, there was nothing there. Nothing. Disbelievingly and dejectedly he started to go back up the drive, when he saw a yellow plastic packet on his neighbor's driveway. Surreptitiously he glanced around... any movement, lights, shadows? No – OK – then just as he started to cross the lawn, he stopped. He realized that he had coveted his neighbor's paper, the deed was done and he was undone.

Would it have mattered? In the great order of things it was small, but that's where relativity does its insidious work. Thing is, even if his neighbor never knew what came to pass– he did. And in the same way when you and I stray from a commandment – we know we have and that is the price of our

integrity and we are diminished to some degree. Our invitation from God is to love, to follow and to observe and when we start to think about things in relative terms, that's when the 'Yes' has to be 'Yes' or the 'No, be 'No'; for as Jesus says "anything more than this comes from the evil one."

These are stark choices; life and prosperity, death and adversity. But when we know the commandments, when we know what we are to observe, that's it, we know. There can be no pretending, no fudging; because the critical piece lies in the cost to relationships, between us and God, and between ourselves and others. But lest we get lost in the morass of guilt and despair, remember too, that this covenant is unlimited and universal. We do fall from Grace. We do covet another's belongings, we are mean-spirited and unjust and yet, if we choose, on a moment by moment basis we can return again to a right relationship. The ultimate gift of Christ, is that we covered by his grace and can be forgiven.

Paul too reprimands the congregation in Corinth for squabbling amongst themselves. *"For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human?"* The invitation from Paul is to see the bigger picture. *"I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth."*

So too with regard to relationships between us within the community, Jesus tells us, *"So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."* Deal with it before it becomes acrimonious; take care to restore relationships before you come before God. Let's make the sharing of the Peace, which follows the Confession and Absolution, a time of unity, community and joy.

On this International Sunday here at St Barnabas, when we celebrate the variety of cultural roots that we share, we find ourselves deeply connected with one another. Many here have worshipped in Anglican churches across the world; in Kenya, Nigeria, England, Barbados, the West Indies; each with differing cadences and emphases; each in different times and places. We may have come from many different worshipping traditions, with different prayers and customs, ways of sharing the peace and worship, yet we are all connected at source. We have one purpose; to love the Lord our God with all our heart and mind and soul. We are all connected at the source of the divine relationship that yearns for us to be in relationship with Him. The divine who extends the hand of invitation to walk with us always, who desires to have us love as He loves us and for that same respect and love to flow into all our relationships with each other.

Sheelagh Clarke+