

### Lent 3: Enduring Religion

Croeso and welcome to the third week of our Lent reflections. And this week, our readings from the Old Testament are from Exodus chapter 20, verses 1 to 17, the very familiar Ten Commandments. And from St. John's Gospel chapter 2, verses 13 to 22, the episode that we call "the cleansing of the Temple", Jesus throwing out of the primary place of Jewish worship, the traders who were making money there. We'll come back to these two stories in a little while, both of which are about the corruption of religion.

But let me begin with a personal reflection. I meet a lot of people in Wales, who were once very involved in church life, but they tell me that they've backed away and decided that they could do better they could live better, without involvement with Church. Now, the statistics bear that out. In the youth of my parents in law, they were very involved with Church, indeed, they were one of 70, Sunday school teachers in their Church. Everybody in their community had some connection with Church somewhere, and about half of the community would have been regularly at worship on a Sunday. But not so today, less than 1% of the population of this part of Wales has any association with organised religion by way of regular worship.

Now, there are very many factors in that change of behaviour, but at least one element is a sense of needing to endure religion, of being uncertain about it. Some tell me that they have been damaged or bruised by their experience of Church. Some are suspicious of whether religion is at all is trustworthy. They see a lack of integrity, and incompatibility of some religious beliefs with the liberal values in an increasingly pluralist, diverse world. And for some of them, it's just about plain distrust. When people of faith are delusional or they let themselves down, be that for instance in child sex abuse, or in violent acts of terror it feels for some that religion is to be endured.

Well, how do we respond to that? I hear many Christians try to answer it in this way - faith in Jesus Christ has very little to do with institutional religion. The important issue is our personal faith and our own relationship with God. And it's best to stand apart from the structures of religious life. Well, I entirely agree that a personal journey of faith is important, but I also know that it does no good to behave like solitary Christians. We are the body of Christ with different limbs and members. And we are knit together to do good. We are a community of faith. Yes, an organisation or an institution. And we have to find a way of building together in the best possible way we can. To build our capacity for good.

So there is another way another approach and it is described for us in those two readings that are set for this week in Lent. The Ten Commandments, what God asks of those who follow his pathway, are very familiar to us. Some of our Churches have these commands embedded into the decoration of their buildings, and most would agree with those directions. "You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal or bear false witness against your neighbour." They are us trying to articulate our core, our moral code, but notice that they begin with the command 'You shall have no other gods before me, and you shall not make for yourself an idol.'

You perhaps remember that at this point in the book of Exodus, the people of Israel are heading into a land where it was common for people to make representations of their gods. And indeed, such a religious habit has always been very attractive to people. So much so that when Moses disappears onto Mount Horeb, for 40 days to engage with God and to receive such commandments, the people run wild, they build for themselves images, including a golden calf. And they declare these images, these idols, to be the gods who brought them up out of the land of Egypt. As a result, Moses then calls one of the tribes, the sons of Levi to bring the people to order, and 3000 people are killed at

that time. But it is also a new journey, a new beginning for this people of faith, a new land into which they will enter with new tablets of stone on which the Ten Commandments appear, and with a new covenant between them and God, which includes resisting building images which they worship.

Now, there are some uncomfortable elements in this story of the formation of religious life and religious observance. Just as there are questions asked when Jesus makes for himself a whip of cords, and with passion, drives out those who had turned the Temple into a marketplace. He wants it to be a place of prayer, not one dominated and defined by commerce.

What we have in common in these two stories is a clear description, that religious faith can be corrupted, it can be hypocritical, it can fail to live up to what it believes in the God it worships. But they also point to what needs to happen, because both stories are stories about reform, how the systems at work get challenged and cleansed. The people of Israel do get rid of their idols. And Jesus calls the Temple authorities back to the purpose of prayer. He proclaims that nothing, and certainly not the making of money which we could describe as an idol itself, has a greater call on our life than the worship of God. It is really important for us to recognise that religious organisations, like all organisations, and human society can fail or behave badly. And it's important that all of us invest in challenging the Church to do better, to live up to what it believes.

I'm closing these Lenten reflections with an example of enduring faith, an example of how certain habits might help us. And this week, my example is not a single individual, but of an organisation made up of lots of individuals. It is often true, it seems to me that those people on the edge of religious organisations, as Jesus stood on the edge of the Temple system, it's they who help to keep us honest. Perhaps they can see better than those of us at the centre of things. Those on the margins challenge when they see unfairness, when they see religious life becoming complacent, or acting unjustly.

In 1992, a number of organisations involved already in global development - the Roman Catholic agency, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Oxfam Traidcraft, the World Development Movement, and the National Federation of Women's Institutes - they came together to form the Fair Trade Foundation. We now know Fair Trade to be a global movement with over a million small scale producers and 3000 grassroots organisations able to trade their goods under 10 principles. It's almost like a modern Ten Commandments if you like. Fair payment, no child or enforced labour, good working conditions. We're currently celebrating Fair Trade Fortnight, which happens at this time of year. And it's reminding me that at this time last year, I met a Palestinian olive oil producer, who is typical of that network of trading according to just principles. He'd come to Cardiff, to tell people about his experience of Fair Trade. We now see the Fair Trade labelling in many of our shops, and we're invited to choose to spend our money in a way which makes trade fair.

Religious life needs to be kept honest, true to what it believes, challenged to act justly. And so I commend to you as I commended the habit of prayer, and the habit of serving others, I commend to you also the habits, be they small or large, of acting justly. It is one of the things which keeps us honest in our faith and keeps us close to God.

Amen.