

**A Podcast for North Coventry Group – 4 October 2020**  
**- 'Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

Hello and welcome to a podcast for and from the North Coventry Group of United Reformed Churches. This has been prepared for the 4 October, the eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost 2020.

Details of music and sources are in the online transcript, and I would like to thank Erica and Janet for their help in preparing this week's edition.

**Introductory Music<sup>i</sup>** – *Hogwarts' Hymn* by Patrick Doyle  
from the soundtrack album of the film  
*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*.

**Call to Worship:** Words from Psalm 19 (vv 7-11, 14)

*The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple;  
the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes;  
the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.  
More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.  
Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.*

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*

*Our hymn has its roots in the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century – Christ is made the sure foundation.*

**Hymn:** *Christ is made the sure foundation* (7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century, tr J M Neale)  
sung by the Choir of Westminster Abbey,  
with Martin Neary and Martin Baker  
from the album, *Favourite Hymns from Westminster Abbey*

*Christ is made the sure foundation,  
Christ the head and cornerstone,  
chosen of the Lord and precious,  
binding all the church in one;  
holy Zion's help forever,  
and her confidence alone.*

*To this temple, where we call thee,  
come, O Lord of hosts, today:  
with thy wonted loving-kindness  
hear thy people as they pray;  
and thy fullest benediction  
shed within its walls away.*

*All that dedicated city,  
dearly loved of God on high,  
in exultant jubilation  
pours perpetual melody;  
God the One in Three adoring  
in glad hymns eternally.*

*Here vouchsafe to all thy servants  
what they ask of thee to gain,  
what they gain from thee forever  
with the blessed to retain,  
and hereafter in thy glory  
evermore with thee to reign. Amen*

## Prayers

Let us pray

Lord God, there are human rules, and your rules. There are earthly rules, temporary restrictions and partial lockdowns. And then there are your rules which last for ever. Not to stop us from living but to enable us to live in peace with each other and recognising our place in your creation. Your rules are universal and reach every part of our lives, every aspect of our behaviour and interaction with others. Yet Christ made them clear.

Help us to learn and to keep your rules, through our reflection on scripture, our experience of holiness in people we look up to and especially through inviting all of you into our hearts.

For now, we are obliged still to worship at a distance from each other. Setting aside any claims of tradition or denominational preferences in order to be safe and to look after each other... which is one of your rules.

Help us day by day and situation by situation to do the right thing.

We are worshipping apart and yet we want to unify our praise and our thanks. Accept all that we do, all that we bring to you in all its forms, on and off-line, in churches made into strange places by one-way systems and mask-wearing and in front of our computers and smartphones.

Your greatness persists even as our ways of coping change, the rules we live under are updated and our spirits rise and fall. Forgive us when self-reliance seems to take us in the wrong direction. May we look to you and your rules for living and make them our principal guide and the yardstick by which we measure everything else.

And now we follow the pattern of prayer that Jesus taught, saying...

### The Lord's Prayer

*Our Father, who art in Heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

**Scripture<sup>ii</sup>:** Exodus 20.1-4, 7-9, 12-20

And God spoke all these words:

<sup>2</sup> 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

<sup>3</sup> 'You shall have no other gods before me.

<sup>4</sup> 'You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.

<sup>7</sup> 'You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

<sup>8</sup> 'Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. <sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labour and do all your work,

<sup>12</sup> 'Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.

<sup>13</sup> 'You shall not murder.

<sup>14</sup> 'You shall not commit adultery.

<sup>15</sup> 'You shall not steal.

<sup>16</sup> 'You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.

<sup>17</sup> 'You shall not covet your neighbour's house. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.'

<sup>18</sup> When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance <sup>19</sup> and said to Moses, 'Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not let God speak to us or we will die.'

<sup>20</sup> Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.'

## Reflection (1)

As I write these words down I am waiting to hear whether there are yet more local lockdowns to be announced to fine-tune (if that's the word) the action being taken in this country to combat the spread of the Covid-19 coronavirus.

And the tweaks and changes to our lives emerge in a whole series of announcements that reach us from the government as emails and new website documents. I signed up to receive the updates, back at the end of March. Since then there have been over 4000 emails come my way. I confess I have only read them very selectively! If we look at the latest version of the advice and rules for opening up churches for worship, this on its own turns out to be a long document of over 8000 words.

Janet has read us the passage from in the midst of the story of the Exodus where God delivers an altogether more succinct list of rules to his people – this people who have been wandering in the Sinai peninsula awaiting the right time for them to enter the land they had been promised. Whether you visualise these rules inscribed on tablets of stone and being carted down a hill by a Charlton Heston-esque bearded figure or as a distillation of the sort of rules that any community might evolve, there is no denying their status.

Erica and I have become more regular listeners to radio during the last year or more – even though there is one aspect of commercial radio that irritates me quite a lot. When there has been an announcement of the latest product you might buy or service you might pay for, or competition that you might enter, there is usually – and I know why they do it – there is usually a burst of accelerated verbiage at the end, something like this:

[speaking very fast]

*'You shall not murder. 'You shall not commit adultery. 'You shall not steal.*

*'You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour. Other terms and conditions apply.*

We read the Ten Commandments in two different places in the Old Testament, and in the Deuteronomy listing they are accompanied by confirmation of the deal God is making:

[Deut 5.32-33] Be careful to do what the Lord your God has commanded you to do... Walk in all the way that the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live long and prosper and prolong your days in the land that you will possess.

I will not be the first to point out that these commandments fall into two groups. The smaller but first group details one's obligations to God – not to worship any other god, not to deploy images of natural things as god-substitutes, not to take his name in vain and to observe a special day for worship. The other group is a select number of acts, or refraining from those acts, that promote a healthy and harmonious community. Not to kill or steal or destroy

families but rather to build them up. Not to give untrue testimony. And last, and in some ways hardest, not to envy what others have got.

Perhaps there are other actions in today's world that we feel could be as destructive – but when we look at rules to keep community safe I am brought back to where I started, or at least to the slogans deployed in the last six months to embed safe practice and mutual support in our national psyche.

*Stay at home – Protect the NHS – Save lives...* evolved most recently into a more shorthand message:

*Hands – Face - Space*

The Ten Commandments are not shorthand for anything. Nor are they throwaway terms and conditions tacked on the end of something. In fact they themselves together with the rest of the Law were summarised by Christ – love God and love your neighbour.

It is when we begin from **that** point and expand out to find just how we may love our neighbour in Covid times that we surely ought to sign up to protecting each other.

It is when we begin from that point and expand out to find just how we may love our neighbour in all times that we discover how the Ten Commandments can still retain their relevance even today.

A Psalm – Psalm 91 – reflecting on the protection God offers those who trust him:

**Song/Music:** *Whoever lives beside the Lord* (a setting of Psalm 91 by John Bell)  
sung by the Wild Goose Worship Group, Iona Community  
from their album *Psalms of Patience, Protest and Praise*.

[Unfortunately our licensing arrangements don't permit the reproduction of the words of this song in this transcript, although they may be found online if you are so equipped, and are certainly in a number of current hymnbooks.]

**Scripture:** Matthew 21.33-46

<sup>33</sup> 'Listen to another parable: there was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall round it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. <sup>34</sup> When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

<sup>35</sup> 'The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. <sup>36</sup> Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them in the same way.

<sup>37</sup> Last of all, he sent his son to them. "They will respect my son," he said.

<sup>38</sup> 'But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, "This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance." <sup>39</sup> So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

<sup>40</sup> 'Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?'

<sup>41</sup> 'He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,' they replied, 'and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.'

<sup>42</sup> Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the Scriptures:  
"The stone the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone;  
the Lord has done this,  
and it is marvellous in our eyes"?'

<sup>43</sup> 'Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. <sup>44</sup> Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.'

<sup>45</sup> When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. <sup>46</sup> They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.

## Reflection (2)

This is not a story to analyse for credibility as a narrative. The idea that a landowner would persevere in sending one emissary after another, culminating in his own son, when previous missions had been greeted with such mayhem and slaughter, is rather farfetched. It's also difficult to see any agricultural tenant risking the penalties of the day for murder in order to gain title to a vineyard.

And it is not a story that Jesus tells a vast crowd of enthusiastic or enquiring wannabe followers who have followed him up a hill or around a lake.

It's a story that Jesus tells in order to respond to the chief priests and the elders, who have accosted Jesus in the Temple and asked him about where his authority comes from.

*Matthew 21.23: the chief priests and the elders came to him. "by what authority are you doing these things?", they asked*

They want to know something about him. After at first seeming to hold back, with a bit of wordplay that has them tying themselves in knots, he obliges, but in the process he tells them something about **themselves**.

He gives them the parable of the two sons, one who agreed to work for his father and then didn't turn up and the other who was at first reluctant and then worked anyway. Which was one way of telling these elite Jews that despite their professed faithful observance of the Law they were not in fact delivering.

The parable that Janet read is a more complex story but has a similar meaning for the chief priests and the elders. Jesus tells of what would have been a well-known way of doing business in the local economy of first-century Palestine. The landowner would have given the fields over to the growing of grapes but would have tenant farmers in place. Just like the way things used to be in the British countryside folk would be growing their crops or tending their livestock on land that didn't belong to them but handing over a proportion of the profits or the yield to the landlord. In our country too, where there was a failure to deliver year by year there would be consequences.

When the owner sent his agents in to collect, these particular tenants have violently failed to live up to their agreement.

Jesus is not being very subtle about all this, as the prophet Isaiah has used the metaphor of the vineyard centuries earlier. In Isaiah chapter 5 we have this:

*my loved one had a vineyard  
on a fertile hillside.  
2 He dug it up and cleared it of stones  
and planted it with the choicest vines.  
He built a watchtower in it  
and cut out a winepress as well.  
Then he looked for a crop of good grapes,  
but it yielded only bad fruit.*

*5 Now I will tell you  
what I am going to do to my vineyard:  
I will take away its hedge,  
and it will be destroyed;  
I will break down its wall,  
and it will be trampled.  
6 I will make it a wasteland,  
neither pruned nor cultivated,  
and briars and thorns will grow there.  
I will command the clouds  
not to rain on it.'*

*7 The vineyard of the Lord Almighty  
is the nation of Israel,  
and the people of Judah  
are the vines he delighted in.  
And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed;  
for righteousness, but heard cries of distress*

With this new, first-century metaphorical vineyard we find the tenants have been given chance after chance to reform, to do the right thing. And the funny thing is, they imagine that despite being indulged to the point of absurdity they think they will ultimately come to own the whole thing. If there is no heir to the property they will have it.

Not a chance. There's probably not a legal system in the world outside totalitarian states where you can acquire a title to property that way. And the chief priests and the elders had better look out. They think they are going the right way about producing their desired outcome but the future in which they thought they would rule the roost will be very different.

Jesus adds a rider.

*The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone.*

What some people thought was of no account – this wandering preacher, this flash-in-the-pan miracle worker, turns out to be the son of God.

And the message for us? We who are leaders in the Church, any who are long-term members, watch out! Beware of pre-judging, of prejudice, of assumptions that we simply know how to do it. Keep searching for what God really requires. It is so much more than reading God's rules. It's about living them.

## Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray.

Father God, we are all subject to rules, but often we find it difficult. Above all we pray that we will remember always to love you and to love our neighbour, and to let that love shine out for all to see.

We pray for all who are involved in setting the rules we live by in the secular world. We pray for wisdom and good judgement for all in authority, in the face of difficult and uncertain times, whether due to climate challenges, political upheaval or managing the Covid crisis. And we pray for humility in our leaders, and that they should lead by example. For those that have not done so, and who have thereby risked the safety of others, we pray for a change of heart, of attitude and of approach. And we pray for your blessing on them all.

We pray for leaders in the faith communities and particularly in our churches, working to understand and apply the rules that have been set for our safety. Help us all to bear the restrictions that we find so hard and to retain our sense of community and of togetherness, even in the face of separation. At a time when there are no easy answers, no single way to do things, help us to be tolerant when we disagree with the decisions made on our behalf. Help us all to live out your gospel in every way we can, showing your love to those we meet by the things that we say and do. And we pray for your blessing on us all.

We pray for all those we know who are struggling at this time. Those who are ill or living with the illness of people they love. Those feeling the effects of reduced and delayed health services. Those suffering loss through bereavement, through separation from loved ones, from restrictions of movement, from redundancy. For those fearful of the virus taking hold and overwhelming us. We pray for all health workers, gearing themselves up to manage the winter pressures made worse by Covid. We pray for those who have worked all through this year with no respite and no chance for holidays and relaxation. And we pray for your blessing on us all.

Amen

**Hymn:**        *Lord, thy word abideth* (words by H W Baker, 1821-77)  
                  sung by the Scottish Festival Singers,  
                  from their album *Timeless Hymns, Vol. 10: I Love To Tell the Story*

*Lord, thy word abideth,  
and our footsteps guideth;  
who its truth believeth  
light and joy receiveth.*

*Who can tell the pleasure,  
who recount the treasure  
by thy word imparted  
to the simple-hearted?*

*When our foes are near us,  
then thy word doth cheer us,  
word of consolation,  
message of salvation.*

*Word of mercy, giving  
succour to the living;  
word of life, supplying  
comfort to the dying.*

*When the storms are o'er us,  
and dark clouds before us,  
then its light directeth,  
and our way protecteth.*

*O that we discerning  
its most holy learning,  
Lord, may love and fear thee,  
evermore be near thee!*

## **Blessing**

May God our guide renew in us a sense of how best to follow his commandments as we live and work for him, playing our part in the Body of Christ.

And may the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be with us all today and for ever. Amen

**Music:**                    *Theme from the TV Series, Inspector Morse*  
written and performed by Barrington Pheloung and taken from the  
*Essential Inspector Morse Collection*  
(The Original Soundtrack from the ITV Series)

Thank you for listening to our podcast. At present it is our hope to continue podcast production until my retirement from the pastoral ministry at the end of 2020, so long as there is a demand. We always welcome feedback, suggestions, and volunteers to read. A full archive of all of our podcasts is on our website [<https://revdbill.uk>].

## **Credits**

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and the theme from the TV Series, *Inspector Morse*, was written and performed by Barrington Pheloung and taken from the *Essential Inspector Morse Collection* (The Original Soundtrack from the ITV Series)

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<sup>i</sup> All music included in this podcast is made available for download under the terms of the PRS for Music Limited Online Music Licence number LE-0019067

<sup>ii</sup> Bible quotations are all taken from the New International Version, Anglicised Edition