

‘I am your God and you are my people!’<sup>1</sup>

This is the clear message of God to the Moses as we hear the story of the commandments given in Exodus 20. God sets out clearly the relationship God has with Moses and the people of Israel. It is important to note that Exodus 20 does not start with a command, it starts with a statement or revelation of relationship.

How do we name the relationships we are in? Do we use words of love or ownership or contract maybe? How do mark that a relationship began, or continues or at some point ends?

In our Lent Study on Monday night we were considering the question of when we first were aware that we had a relationship with God; does it feel that it has always been there, or was there a conscious moment when we became aware of who God was or might be? We then went on to tell stories about how we met God and how that relationship developed and how we might define or express that relationship.

I found this a particularly interesting process, particularly after a year when the nature of many of the relationships we have has changed. Communication and interaction is so much a part of any relationship, and so, not being able to meet with people or share experiences has meant finding new ways to nurture relationships that are important.

The same is true of our relationship with God. For those whom the Eucharist, or corporate worship, is an important part of our daily or weekly relationship with God, the last year has meant that we have needed to find other ways to nurture this relationship.

Relationship is important, it put things into context. It sometimes means we can say things that otherwise might not be appropriate. Relationship hopefully allows us freedom to be honest, to challenge, as well as offer love and compassion.

The passage we hear from Exodus 20 today, while a covenant, is offered into the context of an existing relationship. God can offer these commandments or guidance because a relationship already exists and there are already parameters for how that relationship takes place.

God’s own introduction to these words is important for an appropriate understanding: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” The Ten Commandments are not a law code, a body of laws that are meant to float free of their narrative context. This introductory line about redemption is often omitted from printed versions of the Ten

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-in-lent-2/commentary-on-exodus-201-17-5>

Commandments, unfortunately by Christians. In Judaism this line is recognised as the first; “you shall have no other gods before me” is the second word.<sup>2</sup>

This opening word of God accomplishes several things. It keeps the commandments personally oriented: I am the Lord *your* God. Obedience to the commandments is relationally conceived. These are words given to *you* by *your* God. The law is a *gift* of a God who has redeemed *you*.

The Ten Commandments are an integral part of the covenant between God and people at Mount Sinai. This covenant is a specific covenant *within* the already existing covenant with Abraham (which we heard last week) – it is a code not a new promise.

The Covenants which God establishes are at the heart of the relationship with God’s peoples; and it is important to remember this as we turn to look at our Gospel reading today in John 2 in which Jesus is moving the disciples, and us, on to a new understanding and a new promise – in which Jesus is at the heart of our relationship with God. This understanding of the purpose of Jesus role builds on the personal relationship, God has had with God’s people over many centuries.

And this relationship, which John’s gospel in particular tries to unpack, is still at the heart of our faith today.

In the Hebrew covenants, and in Jesus outburst in the temple forecourts, God is saying that a relationship with us is desired. God wants us, loves us, approaches us and longs to be in relationship with us.

More possibly than any other, the passage we hear from John 2 needs to be read or listened too in context – and in the context of this relationship which God is building with us. The danger is that otherwise we misinterpret Jesus intention as he overturns the tables of the money changes – this is not a tantrum but an act of redefinition of what is important.

The first thing to notice when interpreting the temple incident in the Gospel of John is its different location compared to the Synoptic Gospels.

Whereas in Matthew, Mark, and Luke the temple scene follows Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, in John the episode is moved to immediately after Jesus’ first sign, the wedding at Cana<sup>3</sup>. In the synoptic gospels this story leads to Jesus’ arrest - it functions as the final public act whereby the authorities make the decision to arrest

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2368](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2368) quoting For more on the numbering of the Ten Commandments in various traditions, see Rolf Jacobson’s 2014 commentary on Exodus 19:1-6, 20:1-17.

<sup>333</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2377](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2377)

and kill Jesus. But this is not the case in the Gospel of John, here it takes place at the beginning of Jesus ministry.

In John's account (and actually I think in the other accounts as well) Jesus is not challenging the selling of goods per se – he understands that the selling of goods is part of the temple structure, and part of the pilgrimage, you need, for example to purchase doves which would be used as part of the sacrifice as required under law. What Jesus is challenging is the need for this sacrifice, the need for the current ways of the temple, he is beginning to outline a new understanding of the Kingdom of God. Jesus actions are about a larger theological question which is the location of God – Jesus is teaching that God is bigger and more omnipresence than the temple.

Within this context the temple symbolizes the location and presence of God, but Jesus is essentially saying to the temple leaders that he is the presence of God. Where one looks for God, expects to find God, imagines God to be - are all at stake in this story.<sup>4</sup>

Now this concept of a revealed and relational God is not new, what is new in this context is Jesus. The presence of God, once embodied in God's word and law, is now embodied in this person standing before the Priests and people of Jerusalem. God is in the world and wanting a direct relationship with creation!

Relationship with God is at the heart of both these stories – how we make time, take time to engage with God each day. This engagement will change throughout our life as do all relationships. The more we know of each other, the more we can ask. The more we trust, the more we can challenge. Growth always matters in relationship.

As we continue our Lenten journey this week, we are invited to remember this message. God has invited us to be in a relationship, *'I am your God and you are my people!'* This is a relationship which invites us to grow, act and follow – we just have to join in and continue in the journey. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2377](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2377)