

Belonging – Exodus 20: 1-20

Just when you thought – ah church today will be a welcome break from laws, rules, regulations and guidelines with which we have been bombarded in recent weeks – and what do we find - another list of laws, rules, regulations and guidelines. There really is no getting away from them these days and the Israelites found this also to be true as they wandered round and round in the wilderness.

Now don't worry we are not going to analyse minutely each commandment this morning but rather this is another example and teaching in how community is formed and retained. Within the giving and receiving of these laws we see another step in the formation of this new community – this new people of God.

We have the privilege of witnessing God creating a new nation, developing a new intimate relationship with his people and in that witness we ourselves are being challenged and inspired. In many ways we too are transitioning into a different way of being God's community and while it is undoubtedly scary and unsettling, within the Exodus story we can take courage and strength as we see again the constancy of God, the overwhelming love and patience of God, the great desire of God to have relationship with His people in all their failings and fallibilities. So we do not need to see these commandments as a strict set of laws set out to test the obedience of the people but rather they are another example of God's freewill towards the Israelite people offering them the opportunity to accept a covenantal relationship with

himself. We believe God is still offering us this relationship through His Son Jesus Christ and He will not force us nor manipulate us into that relationship – it is by our freewill alone.

So let's look at these rules and what they may signify on a deeper level.

Moses' head must have been turned with these rebellious, complaining, hurting, angry people. They reach a torrent of waves and complain the Egyptian army will desecrate them – God provides a way through. They get hungry and complain of no food – God provides daily manna for them. They begin to feel thirst and lack of water and again they believe they have been abandoned to die in the wilderness – and again God provides water from a rock. So from the evidence it appears this was a bunch of normal people – unruly at times, frightened, hurting, confused, unsettled and that was a difficult mix in which to lead and journey onwards.

Yet step by step we see God taking his people deeper and deeper into an understanding of what belonging to His community is all about. Nationhood was to be tied to the presence of God and in these stories of the wilderness we find lines of thought with respect to that relationship.

Yes there were rules and conditions to be obeyed and the agreement followed these rules whereby the people entered into a covenantal relationship with God. We see the moral and ethical basis for that relationship in these commandments.

But just as important as the rules was the acknowledgment of the presence of God. This was a physical presence of God which moved with the people as they journeyed onwards. The tabernacle was seen as the point on earth where God and earth touched and this was the holiest of the holies so in the creation of God's people there was also an understanding of holiness.

This was what set God's people apart from other nations – a covenant with a holy people. The Israelite nation is to live rightly with God and with each other – these rules are not legal documents but rather are principles seeking obedience. A set of principles for right living yet all bound up in the sacred and holy presence of God.

And again at this point in our history we truly do get this distinction. So many guidelines, restrictions, rules, regulations have been initiated in recent months and weeks in regard to keeping ourselves and others safe. Yet rather than legal documents they are principles set out for safe living. They present us with ways to live rightly with one another by ensuring safety to the most vulnerable, by allowing our children to remain in school and our economy to have a chance to recover. And yes sacrifice is required, but when have we, as God's people, ever believed sacrifice was not required to live as God's holy nation?

Regardless of the rules we have been commanded by Jesus Christ to live rightly with God and with our neighbours. Jesus directly addresses this when questioned about the greatest commandment and succinctly summarises the whole

decalogue 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind and love your neighbour as you love yourself'.

These have not changed and we have seen them being lived out as we have looked after neighbours and church family. We see it everytime we wear a mask in a shop, we see it everytime we choose to socially distance, we see it everytime we choose to sacrifice our own wants for the needs of our community.

The Ten Commandments were given to a struggling hurting yearning people who unbeknownst to them were becoming a people belonging to God. Those principles of putting God first and loving our neighbour still are core to how we live rightly and grow into deeper relationship with God and with each other.

This was to be the bedrock for the Israelites that would set them apart from other nations. So in our 21st century with all the challenges and opportunities it presents we do have to ask how do our lives reflect obedience and the sacred presence of God to others within our community? Can we as church still be a source of God's presence to our communities?

I believe the answer is a resounding yes but it will take effort and commitment and dedication of the whole community.

When the Israelites first escaped from Egypt they were only given the escape route. Then when hunger threatened to

strike – manna was provided. Then when thirst came – water was provided. Now we have reached the story where the people can begin to become a cohesive group with boundaries and rules and responsibilities providing a sense of identity. But each of these steps came at the appointed time. If the whole plan had been made known as the suffered cruelty under Pharaoh, it is entirely possible they would have chosen to remain with stable slavery rather than sacrificial servanthood but God in His grace provided what was needed as it was needed.

On 19th March – if we had been told that in six months time we would still be unable to meet freely with friends, or enjoy social interaction with family or meet in our usual numbers and practices at church, I think there would have been a danger of crumbling – so vast was this change to which we would have to adapt. But bit by bit in little steps we figured out how to continue to be God’s community – through technology, through creative imagination, through sacrificial giving of time and talents.

We see our own journey mirrored in this Exodus account – this is our time of testing – the time when we are even now being shaped into the community of God needs us to be. And in generations to come how amazing it would be if those who come after recognise this was the beginning of a new community and a new people of God in Newtownbreda. Bit by bit and step by step we journey on – learning how to be community in this new reality and remembering where God leads – God provides.

