Struggling with Sunday’s Readings

Lent 3 7th March 2021

Exodus 20. 1-17 The Ten Commandments.

Psalm 19 Creation and our lives in perfect balance.

1 Corinthians 1. 18-25 The Cross, turning values upside-down.

John 2. 13-22 Christ in the Temple

I suspect a possible unifying theme today is about the Law and the New Law of redeeming love. First, the Law. There are accounts in the Old Testament that are believed to go as far back as the shaping of our human culture. For instance, when Isaac is saved from being sacrificed by his dad by the fortuitous ram caught by its horns in the thicket, is this really signalling the end of human sacrifice? The opening two verses of Psalm 121 pose a similar debate between ‘the hills’ (the hill altars) and ‘the Lord who made heaven and earth’: some translators think the opening is asking the question ‘Should I lift my eyes to the hills?’ No, don’t look to the hills, look to the Lord who made the hills. And so too, the Commandments may represent a very early set of agreed standards by which society would operate, here brought together and codified for the first recorded time. Only one of the ten omits the word ‘not’: ‘Honour your father and you mother…that your days may be long..’ As I write, I am conscious that Pope Francis is in Iraq pleading for tolerance and fraternity between cultures and faiths in a land which has seen so much cruelty, destruction and death.

Psalm 19 delights in the wonder and perfect balance of creation and goes on to take an equal delight in the interaction of the ‘law of the Lord’ and the human benefits derived from it, including revival, wisdom and enlightenment.

St Paul, an educated Jew living at the crossroads of the world, puts forward the message of the cross, a singular and starkly different focus from the preoccupations of the peoples he knew. Here is neither Greek wisdom nor Jewish demands to see powers and signs. In the crucifixion of our Lord lies the power and the wisdom of God. Compare that with the strutting populist leaders of nations we are seeing today, to say nothing of the crimes being perpetrated in Myanmar. Naked power always loses in the end, but usually at great cost. Remember the brave.

St John has Christ going to the Temple twice, at the beginning and end of his ministry: other evangelists only once. There is something of an Old Testament feel about this passage. Christ stands against the corruption which the Temple had become, turned into a marketplace for trade, barter and money changing. Psalm 69 is quoted, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me’. This psalm speaks of the writer being crushed by the corruption of others. The passage has the air of prophetic action about it, both in the actions of Christ and also in what we know is to follow: ‘Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.

All in all, not a very comfortable set of readings, but it’s where we are. I wish you all well for the week. Next Sunday, Mothering Sunday, is also known as Refreshment Sunday. Ladies, I hope someone bakes you a simnel cake. Barry