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SERMONS FOR THE CHRISTIAN YEAR

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2nd October: Trinity 19

THE COMMANDMENTS THEN AND NOW

By the Very Revd John McIndoe
Glasgow

Exodus 20:1-17; Isaiah 5:1-7; Matthew 21:33-46

A poll conducted earlier this year for a programme on 'The New Ten Commandments' (Channel 4) produced a top-ten list of guidelines-for-today drawn from some 40,000 respondents. Number one was 'Treat others as you would have them treat you', which, it is interesting to note, is the Golden Rule as Jesus taught it. The rest were for the most part applications of that principle: three against cheating, violence and killing; three for protecting family life and caring for children and the vulnerable; one for honesty; one for people being 'responsible'; and one for protecting the environment.

You can't disagree with any of these; everyone is in favour of virtue; but they are not quite the Ten Commandments as we know them. One commentator, noting that some of the original commandments had been quietly dropped, considered that their omission said a lot about today's society. For example, if we did not *covet* how would modern consumerism flourish, and if nobody took God's name in vain conversation in the United Kingdom would grind to a halt. More seriously, he wondered what effect discounting *adultery* would have in relation to 'protecting families and nurturing children'. In these ways he concluded that the new, commandments are more 'me-centred' than the old ones. But being new doesn't mean being easy.

The demanding thing about commandments has never been the framing of them but the keeping of them. So many cross-currents conspire to sweep away our good intentions that we find ourselves easily caught in a tangle of hypocrisy and failure. How, for example, can our generation make a convincing case

for being committed to the protection and nurturing of family life when a recent survey of teenage girls found that almost four in ten came from broken homes and nine out of ten claim to suffer depression in face of present-day stresses like the pressure to look good, school bullying, and the availability of drink and drugs (*Emotional Health Survey*, Feb 2005). Again, how plausible is it for moderns to proclaim that people should 'take responsibility' when our own generation is marked by such social deficiencies as voter-apathy and obesity on an epidemic scale.

But the gap between how things should be and how things are is nothing new. The Bible itself can be read as the record of a people's constant underperformance. At the heart of the original commandments lay the obligation to give a proper due to all, as a result of which a blessed state of harmony might be established between God and man, and man and the creation. But things never quite worked out; one way or another people got in the way: their greed, their guilt, their grumbling.

Which brings us to God's Complaint. The Lord as has a controversy with his people. 'My beloved had a vineyard in a very fruitful hill. He fenced it and gathered out the stones and planted it with the choicest vine and built a tower in the midst of it and also made a wine-press therein. And he looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes ... The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel and the men of Judah his pleasant plant: he looked for justice but behold oppression, for righteousness but behold a cry' (Isaiah 5).

Jesus keeps up the Lord's controversy with his people. In the parable of the Vineyard (today's gospel reading) attention is directly focused on the tenants who not only fail to produce the required goods but in their arrogance beat up all the emissaries sent by the proprietor and finally kill the son and heir in an attempt to seize the business for themselves. The owner sweeps the rascals off to a sticky end

and appoints a new set of tenants who will do a better job and deliver the goods as required. The bad tenants' fault was that they failed to give to the proprietor what was his due. From that primal error all the troubles flowed.

In this parable it is clear that Jesus is attacking the Pharisees of his day. They have taken their eye off the priority, being more concerned for the minutiae of religious protocol than the requirement of God. In particular they have neglected *the weightier matters of the Law: justice, mercy and good faith* (Matt 23:23). We are invited, therefore, to consider how easily the true can be stifled by the trivial and how bewilderingly the purposes of God can end up in frustration and defeat. It is as though an enemy was at work.

The new commandments produced by the TV poll, worthy as they are, contain nothing by way of duty to God. This is no surprise against the background of our modern secular society which, however, is still prepared to engage with the age-old biblical question *Am I my brother's keeper?* Despite the individualism of the age there is still, it seems, a consensus in favour of a caring society, which cannot be an unwelcome consideration for any person of faith. The durability of such a policy, however, rests upon the willingness of enough individuals of good-will continuing to give it support, but the reservoir of good-will is not limitless and may one day run out. Sentiment alone will be a feeble weapon against advancing pragmatism, as controversies over new medical technologies have shown. Only a stance on the basis of conviction allied to clear-headedness, will be able to ensure that the best interests of man and the truest purposes of God are served.

The most telling reason for locating the commandments in a spiritual context relates to the matter of conviction. No doubt many different motivations have led people to obey the commandments (e.g. duty, fear, convention) but none of these comes anywhere near the motivation that arises from religious faith. This is that the commandments are to be embraced not because they are commanded but because the soul that has come to know and feel the gracious love of God has no greater desire than to give a whole-hearted and affectionate assent to God's published priorities. *O how I love thy law; it is my meditation all the day.*

St Paul, who had been through all the other ways of trying to obey the commandments before he found

the way of grace, summed up his philosophy in a single verse: 'The Kingdom of God is not eating and drinking but justice, peace and joy inspired by the Holy Spirit' (Rom 14:17). The reference to 'the Holy Spirit' is key for understanding the Christian attitude towards the keeping of commandments old or new.

(a) Since the Holy Spirit (the Spirit of Christ) produces a spirit of gratitude in response to grace it is clear that the religious motive for obeying the commandments is primarily thankfulness. *O taste and see that the Lord is good: blessed is the man that trusteth in him.*

(b) Since the Holy Spirit is also a spirit of forgiveness and restoration, the person of faith will face with hopefulness and not mere regret the failures that inevitably come to those who try to live according to the commandments. *Who can understand his errors? Cleanse thou me from secret faults.*

In these ways, as persons of faith, we may seek to fulfil the all-embracing injunction to love the Lord our God and our neighbour as ourselves.

9th October: Trinity 20

FROM IDOLATRY TO MORALITY

*By Mrs Sue Lampitt
Charlescote, Warwick*

Exodus 32:1-14; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

At first sight the three readings for today seem curiously ill-assorted.

The idolatrous Israelites provoke the anger of a highly anthropomorphic Yahweh who regrets having chosen them and is about to choose Moses and his descendants instead. (Noah all over again?)

In Matthew the king – usually a metaphor for God – wipes out the citizens who rudely refuse his invitations for his son's wedding feast and then continues in the same vindictive fashion by throwing out a wedding guest who lacks the proper wedding garment, not only ejecting him but having him bound hand and foot as well and casting him into outer darkness.

Compare this with Paul in irenic mode, inviting us to dwell on the things which are true, pure, lovely and of good report.

Where is all this leading?

In our multi-faith age serious questions are raised here. Is God like a tyrant who brooks not the least infringement of his rules?

Is our knowledge of these rules so certain that we have no excuse if we get the details wrong?

Are we all actually carried away by Golden Calf syndrome – self-indulgence, and the worship of power, be it money or fame?

Or can we ignore the rest of the world and move forward serenely in our Christian faith with the peace of God in our hearts filling our minds with the true, the good and the beautiful, keeping the tradition which was passed on to us, and delighting in the peace of God?

To put it simply, is there a threat or isn't there? If there is a threat, what sort of a threat is it? Where does it come from? How should we respond? Might we be heading for destruction, bound hand and foot?

To pre-scientific peoples the world of nature is awesome indeed. The power of a wild bull would have impressed itself on anyone who tried to handle one or saw two such animals fighting. Even today, 'Beware of the Bull' is usually enough to keep everyone out of the field. All over the Mediterranean lands the bull was held in great respect and was used as a symbol for the power of the gods. There are still hundreds of mummified bulls in Egypt and the story of the Minotaur in Crete resonated all over the islands and mainland of Greece as a symbol of Cretan power.

No wonder therefore that the Israelites used the same symbol for the power of Yahweh. When Jeroboam, son of Nebat, set up his sanctuaries at Dan and Bethel to stop his subjects continuing to visit the Temple in Jerusalem and used bull images to represent Yahweh, it is unlikely that his contemporaries saw anything out of the ordinary. After all the fitments and furnishings of Solomon's Temple seem to have echoed the Canaanite patterns which surrounded him, so why not use the familiar bull image to represent Yahweh, mighty in battle and arbiter of the nations?

However, between 922 BC and 621 BC the aniconic desert tradition had asserted itself, at least in the minds of the Deuteronomists. We read their editorial comments on Jeroboam's sinfulness and get the message:

Bull image = pagan idolatry

So we are well-prepared in our theological thinking to be properly shocked by the idolatry of the Golden Calf.

The battle to move Israel from seeing Yahweh as primarily representative of the forces of nature towards the idea of Yahweh as a God whose demands are primarily to be found in the area of morality is central to the Old Testament.

'I hate, I detest your sacrifices.' 'Let justice run down like a mighty stream.' 'I desire mercy not sacrifice.'

The prophets were quite sure that protecting the vulnerable was God's priority, well ahead of sacrifice, indeed, sacrifice was invalidated if morality was not in place.

This whole struggle to bring morality to the fore over superstitious nature worship needed the shock of Exile to help it triumph and those who returned from Exile were monotheists, even if they didn't always keep the Torah as well as they should have done.

This triumph was essential, you cannot read off a moral world from nature – ask Richard Dawkins of *The Selfish Gene* – even altruism is compromised in biology, but the faith of revealed religion is that God is just, not just powerful.

In our Matthean parable there is no way of knowing whether the anger of the tyrant king is the pain of the Early Church or was truly on the lips of Jesus, however, what we do know is that at the centre of our faith we find self-sacrifice, not the immolation of others. So perhaps we should learn the over-all lesson that our choices are indeed serious, and take care not to allegorize this too precisely. This interpretation is an important move to counter the unjustifiable certainty of those who think they know just what even the embroidery on a wedding garment should be. Such certainty is tempting in our multi-faith age, but we must tread confidently without it – it cannot be had, as the sheep and the goats tell us.

What new insights can Paul the erstwhile Pharasaic rabbi offer us?

In this most gently and inclusive of passages we see Paul at his softest and most charming – the Philippians had made it easy for him. These words are very familiar to many people because they have been seen as so appropriate for a valedictory gathering or for the start of a new term, 'Whatsoever things are true, pure, lovely and of good report.' These things

cannot be commercialized or corralled. They include, they aspire, they invite, they can be universalized, they can be shared.

Once upon a time it was the power of nature which held sway, gradually morality came to be seen as the important area when it came to worshipping God, and now perhaps it is no surprise that the two come back together as we see the power of nature to overwhelm us, in a world on the edge, where our actions have the power to make our beautiful blue-green planet uninhabitable. It turns out that our choices are indeed eternally important. It took the shock of Exile to embed the supremacy of the God and his moral law in Israel, and eliminate the idolatry and nature-worship which had previously been lurking just under the surface. We live in just such a time of crisis ourselves but as yet we scarcely believe it.

You cannot read off from nature the Law which will save us from the power of nature. That law is revealed. It is revealed in the demands of the prophets for justice for the vulnerable and in the self-giving of Jesus. Nature loves the Golden Calf – go for power and when you've got it strut your stuff, look at the peacock's extravagant tail, the bull's massive horns, the parasitic rufflia's over-blown blooms. In society at large we take nature's route, some rebellious people withdraw into a ghetto of moralistic certainty to save their souls, but our Christian calling is to be salt and light – we may not put our heads under the pillow whilst the world hurtles, bound hand and foot so to speak, into the abyss.

'Whatsoever things are true, pure, lovely and of good report ...' only if we 'think on these things' and row back from Golden Calf syndrome, can we use God's law to preserve God's world.

For better or worse we have the whole world in *our* hands.

16th October: Trinity 21

THE BACKSIDE OF GOD

By the Revd Canon Marilyn McCord Adams
Christ Church, Oxford

Exodus 33:12–23

*'You shall see my backside.'
'No human can see my face and live!'*

The biblical Moses is a curious mixture of timidity andchutzpah. He flees for his life after murdering an Egyptian, cowers at the prospect of speaking before Pharaoh, and is sensibly sceptical of leading the slaves out of Egypt. Yet, from the beginning, he establishes a remarkable record of pressing for more intimate access into the name and the nature, the character and purposes of GOD.

'You can't expect me to take on this job, you can't expect me to have any credibility either with the children of Israel or with Egypt's ruler, unless You tell me Your name.' God is coy: 'My name is YHWH: I-AM-WHO-I-AM, I-WILL-BE-WHO-I-WILL-BE. Forget trying to pin me down!' Moses bargains. YHWH does make four concessions: He furnishes references – to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; He sketches the game plan that directly concerns Moses; He supplies Moses with a magic wand; and He allows Aaron as a mouthpiece in the negotiations with Pharaoh. But YHWH refuses access to the Divine name and nature. YHWH's offer seems far from too good to refuse. But YHWH insists; His offer is *compelling*. Moses has to accept on the basis of the burning-bush call and external attestations. This is what God expects. And God gets what God wants!

*'You shall see my backside.'
'No human can see my face and live!'*

Certainly, this seems a close-to-truthful description. Moses is favoured with a view of God's backside. But beginning with the plagues in Egypt, the public had to deal with God's *up-front* side. The bible story bears witness: force and violence, death and destruction have followed in His wake!

YHWH-I-AM-WHAT-I-AM, I-WILL-BE-WHAT-I-WILL-BE – betrothed Abraham's dynasty in Haran, but – after allowing famine to drive Israel down to Egypt – proceeded to ignore her for 400 years. Israel's social position sank from being the clan of Pharaoh's second in command under Joseph, to the status of forced labour, of field slavery. I-AM-WHAT-I-AM, I-WILL-BE-WHAT-I-WILL-BE: YHWH does what YHWH jolly well pleases, acts when YHWH takes the notion. Suddenly interested, YHWH uproots Israel against her will. What sensible slave girl could be sanguine about exchanging the leeks and cucumbers of civilized life for forty years of wilderness-wandering followed by eventual death in the desert? To recoup His own reputation,

YHWH sets Pharaoh up in a contest where apparent victories occasion mounting ruin on land and populace and royal household – bloody rivers; swarming frogs; gnats and flies, hail and locusts destroying the crops; mad-cattle disease killing off the livestock; outbreaks of boils, culminating in a visit by the angel of death. YHWH's ultimate trick terrorizes Israel whose exodus is tailed by the hot pursuit of Egyptian soldiers. I-AM-WHO-I-AM, I-WILL-BE-WHAT-I-WILL-BE is out for dramatic effect: Israel barely gets across, when the water rushes back, drowning Pharaoh's horses and riders in the Reed Sea!

Having liquidated the Egyptians, YHWH turns His scary up-front side towards His bride-to-be. Quaking at Divine descent, Sinai belches forth lava and fire and smoke and deafening roar. YHWH warns of fate-worse-than-instant-death for *hoi palloi* who touch the mountain, and disappears Moses in the cloud of smoke for forty days to negotiate the marriage contract, chisel it in stone, bring it back down to seal the deal. What was Israel to think? She didn't want to come. She scarcely knew her supposed bridegroom or Moses the alleged matchmaker. Already YHWH was yanking her around in ways that felt abusive. Maybe He intended to kill her in the desert. If she could find some safer, more approachable, more predictable provider, wouldn't Israel be smart to take up with someone else?

Wasn't Moses in a position to *know* that Israel's fears were well-founded? Even as Israel danced around the Golden Calf, Moses was confronting God's up-front side at closer range. One whiff of the adultery below, and YHWH is ready to throw a temper tantrum. Divine wrath is poised to break out and consume her, if ever she gets within range. 'Forget Israel! Let me destroy her and start over with your family,' YHWH propositions Moses. Moses is caught in the middle, seemingly scrambling to calm YHWH down, to persuade YHWH that not going through with the marriage would be disastrous for His reputation: prove Him to be *foolish*, going for a girl so far beneath His station, electing to make this motley crew His people, without counting the costs; *malicious*, luring her out into the desert to destroy her; *dishonest*, lacking the integrity to keep His promises to the patriarchs. 'No human can see my face and live' might seem an exaggeration. But – so far as this story goes

– 'immature and capricious, untrustworthy and mean' might seem a defensible description of God's up-front side!

Drawn-out diplomacy is required before Moses can get the wedding back on the calendar. Moses becomes ever-more caught in the middle. Pleading Israel's case, Moses puts any capital he has with YHWH on the line: 'Treat me the same way as them; if You blot them out of Your book, You'll have to blot me out as well!' 'If You're not going up to Canaan with us, then don't send us up.' YHWH gives in, one inch at a time: 'Alright, she can go up and live in the dwelling I prepared, but I won't live there. If I see her, I'll kill her in a minute!' 'Alright, I'll send an angelic escort ... well, even My Presence!' Finally, Moses lays it on the line: 'You know that ancient wives are nobodies without their husbands. It's only Your going in and out with us that makes us a people! You have to come, live there with us, or we'll simply disintegrate, fall apart!'

Yet, the negotiation process also bonds Moses ever more tightly with God. Moses would go outside the camp; then God would descend on the tabernacle, the bible says, talk to Moses friend to friend. This experience of double identification – with Israel as her spokesman, with YHWH her God willy nilly; the prospect of the hard journey through the wilderness towards the land of promise, makes it urgent for Moses to renew his request. 'You told me to bring up this people. You know *me*, You know *us* by name. Show me Your ways. Tell me *Your* name! Show me Your glory!'

*'You shall see my backside.'
'No human can see my face and live!'*

The up-front side of God is YHWH the terrible and terrifying, Who forgets and leaves His people in the lurch, and then – once He remembers – is so touchy that He threatens to destroy them. The backside of God is His Goodness, which Moses *experiences*. But as go-between and leader, Moses needs God to show him more clearly, needs God's help in putting what he sees into words, so that he can explain it to Israel, so that he can help the people trust YHWH to be good to them, despite the rough and tumble of their lives.

YHWH's answer comes in two sittings. God makes Divine Goodness pass by, so that Moses can

get a better view. But God says only what He said before: 'I-AM-WHAT-I-AM. I-WILL-BE-WHAT-I-WILL-BE. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious. I will show mercy on those on whom I will show mercy.' 'Forget trying to control me! My ways are higher than your ways!' The second time, God gives more explicit information. YHWH descends in a cloud and proclaims His name: 'YHWH, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but Who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the sins of the fathers upon children's children to the third and fourth generation.'

Contrary to His up-front persona, YHWH is Goodness; YHWH has a bias towards mercy; YHWH is quintessential covenant love and faithfulness; YHWH forgives even if He also punishes sin. Given who Israel is, covenant infidelity will be a recurrent problem. It *is* serious. But YHWH is reliable. The unlikely marriage between God and His people will work, because God gets what God wants, and YHWH is determined that it will!

Because God is Maker and Governor of all things, the often horrendous rough and tumble of human life can't help being a consequence of Divine permissiveness and of God's timing being so radically out of synch with ours. But later prophets reflected, trust in God's Goodness is incompatible with interpreting human ills in terms of Divine wrath and punishment. Sometimes, often, the relatively righteous suffer at the hands of the comparatively wicked; the servants of God are tormented precisely because of their loyalty to God. The Exodus story to the contrary notwithstanding, the book of Job urges, Divine punishment for guilt is intolerable as an explanation of AIDS and tsunamis.

Happily, the Gospels represent God as showing off His backside, of trying to make His name and nature explicit, another way. The Divine Word Itself takes Moses' place, casts His lot with confused and suffering humanity, tries to win trust through solidarity: by becoming flesh and tabernacling with us; by stretching out arms of love on the hard wood of the cross; by taking the name of Emmanuel – God with us no matter what, everywhere and always; by proclaiming the name of Jesus, which – being translated – means YHWH saves!

23rd October: Trinity 22

IN THE CITY

*By the Revd Dr Chris Knights
Scotswood, Newcastle-upon-Tyne*

Deuteronomy 34:1-12; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8;
Matthew 22:34-46

In the middle of last year, I left the 'coastal suburbia' of Whitley Bay and moved to Scotswood, an 'inner City' part of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. I now divide my time between being Priest-in-Charge of St Margaret's Church and Parish, and being the 'face' of the Church of England in the regeneration of the West End of Newcastle.

And since I've come to my present place and post, I've rediscovered the great extent to which the Bible is an 'urban book'. Today's Bible readings bear this out. Not the Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy 34, perhaps, but certainly the Epistle from 1 Thessalonians 2 and the Gospel from Matthew 22. The Epistle is addressed to Christians in one Greek city – Thessalonica – and talks about events in another – Philippi. Indeed, the Acts of the Apostles demonstrates that Paul's missionary strategy, both in Asia and in Europe, was to evangelize and to establish churches in towns and cities, rather than in villages or in the countryside. As a result, Paul's letters to churches are all addressed to urban congregations.

And today's Gospel reading is set in Jerusalem, the political, social, economic, military and religious capital of Judaea. Indeed, in all four of the Gospels, Jerusalem, *the city*, looms large. The events of Holy Week, the last week of Jesus' life, all take place in or just outside Jerusalem, and occupy a huge percentage of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John's narratives. In addition, John also has Jesus visit the capital on at least four other occasions before Palm Sunday, and Matthew, Mark and particularly Luke make much of Jerusalem as Jesus' destination prior to the Triumphal Entry.

The 'Urban' does not just dominate the Bible. It dominates the contemporary world as well. It now seems to be the case that over half of this world's population live in urban areas, and the figure is rapidly increasing all the time. In contemporary England, around 80 per cent of the population are now classified as urban-dwellers, and only 20 per

cent as rural-dwellers. By contrast, only 7 per cent of the land in England is urban, and 93 per cent rural.

So, the fact that most people in this country live in urban areas, the fact that so much of the Bible comes from an urban culture, the fact that the most significant week of Jesus' life for the evangelists occurred in an urban context can all lead us to conclude that the urban needs to be the prime focus of the Church's ministry, mission, care, concern and prayer today.

That is easy to say. But it is not at all an easy task. For contemporary cities are complex, contested, conflictual, competitive, cosmopolitan places that can be scary to live in, difficult to understand and depressing to minister in.

But, actually, that's how it's always been. Come back to our readings for today. Paul's evangelistic ministry in the cities of the Roman Empire was no bed of roses. In our 1 Thessalonians passage, he speaks of 'having *suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi*' (2:2) and of declaring to the Thessalonians 'the gospel of God *in spite of great opposition*'. Urban life and faith, for Paul, were not easy.

Neither were they for Jesus in Jerusalem, in Holy Week. Almost the whole of the narrative of Holy Week is taken up with conflict, contest and competition between Jesus and various parties and factions within Jerusalem, such as the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the teachers of the Law, Herod and his followers, the Romans under Pontius Pilate. The ongoing conflict, contest and competition *between* those various parties and factions was not of very much interest to the Gospel-writers, but they hint at it nevertheless, for instance in the note in Luke (23:12) that Herod and Pilate became friends after Jesus' trial, after a longstanding feud between them, or in the opening of today's Gospel reading (Matt 22:34), that declares that the Pharisees took their turn against Jesus in order to succeed where their rivals the Sadducees had failed.

And in facing the very real challenges of being called to be Church 'in the city' today, of being present in the city, of praying for the city, practising in the city and proclaiming in the city (a categorization I have drawn from Robert Linthicum's *City of God: City of Satan* published by Zondervan in 1991), in facing those challenges we can be encouraged and strengthened by both the example and the teaching of both Paul and Jesus.

Both Paul and Jesus had great courage, consistency and constancy. Both were absolutely faithful to God, had absolute trust in him and sought 'not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts' (1 Thessalonians 2:4). Both were quite clear about their message and proclaimed it loudly and clearly, yet also with gentleness, courtesy and respect. In short, they modelled the love for God and for neighbour that was clearly a cornerstone of the teaching of Jesus in the city (Matt 22:37–40), derived so very evidently from the *Torah*.

And, similarly, we are called to be courageous, to be consistent, to be constant, to be faithful to God, to have absolute trust in God, to seek to please God and not those around us, to be quite clear about our Gospel, to proclaim it loudly and clearly, yet to have also gentleness, courtesy and respect for those around us 'in the city'. In short, we are called to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and to love our neighbours as ourselves 'in the city' today – where our neighbours will most likely be very different from us, probably far more different from us than the Samaritan was from the Jew in the parable added to the 'Summary of the Law' in Luke's Gospel (10:25–38).

That's an extremely tall order! But we cannot and we must not shirk it. We must be 'in the city'. And we do have resources to help us in that task, not only the example and the teaching of Jesus and Paul, but also the Holy Spirit, Christ's own presence with us and within us to guide us and to sustain us, and the promise of Christ that, if we are faithful – and being faithful is far more important than being 'successful' – he will be faithful to us, and will ensure that we do not lose our ultimate reward in that Heavenly City, the new Jerusalem – but that is to anticipate next Sunday and our celebration of the 'Feast of All Saints'.

30th October: All Saints Day

THE GOD WHO WIPES AWAY TEARS FROM OUR EYES

By the Revd John Weir Cook
Edinburgh

Revelation 7:9–17 and St Matthew 5:1–12

Last week I met a saint. There are lots of them but they are not always easy to spot for they look so much like you and me and other ordinary folk. This lady (though there were probably 'he' saints last week that I failed to spot) greeted me warmly and cheerily when I called. She was dying and she and I both knew that, which made things much easier. We spoke of her life, which had not been easy but she was full of gratitude for the many blessings she had received. I was humbled for I knew something of the privations she had had to endure. We spoke of how she was at present: 'Any pain?' I enquired. She nodded and I caught a small wince as she laid her head back on the pillow. But she was well looked after, warm and comfortable in her own home with some of her family paying constant attention. 'Such flowers, such lovely visitors, and such dreams when I sleep, after the drugs take effect,' she told me.

'And what then?' I asked deliberately and she smiled. 'I have no fears where I am going and great hopes of who I am going to see. And', she smiled, 'there will be music.'

I could see she was tiring. We shared a prayer, holding hands and smiling, though my eyes were glistening too.

This is a day for special remembrance of saints and especially the ordinary ones whom the church has not yet recognized which doesn't really matter for God has known them all along.

I think of the man in Patmos who had that same sense of what was and is and is to come. He had seen the persecutions and had himself suffered having to stand up for his faith in face of danger. Banishment was his punishment and he knew worse was to come. What was to come was a great shaking and shifting of the fragile church faced with confessing and risking their life or slipping quietly into the grey fog of unbelief, misbelief and no belief. His words strengthened the church under persecution and nerved it for the bad times to come. They stood firm, we now know that, but it was never easy and we wonder how we might have managed ourselves, ordinary saints that we are, under that testing pressure.

And of what is to come Presbyterian John writes with such vivid imagination, such eloquence and passion, with verbal pictures and metaphors, sounds and images that have comforted many in great distress. He has also provided a challenge to cryptographers, cabbalists and seekers after answers from these

scriptures. They pore over them, often with an ulterior motive: I know the question and I know the answer now let me adjust the proof.

And what of those saints, ordinary Christians, under extra ordinary pressure. They were encouraged, united and willing to stand firm. They remembered the sufferings of the past, they steeled themselves for what was to come, holding fast to those promises in the apocalypse of John and looking forward to the promises of heaven, the river, the trees, those they had loved and lost, mighty choirs, the heavenly music and the discomfiture of those who went into the bottomless pit. They had a firm sense of what was, and is and is to come.

And what of us who read these words now. We struggle to make any sense of them: the imagery is lurid, the pictures stark: the time of trial, the thousand years, the horsemen, the dragons and the Lamb in the midst. It is thrilling if mystifying and scary too.

Today we think of these saints in glory: many of them we know, some we have heard about but countless thousands upon thousands surround the throne and the Lamb is in the midst. Is it true? Is it real? Fantastic yes but why not real, for the saints are real.

How do we recognize them?

We know them because they can see the beatitudes the right way up. They have experienced what it is like to be meek, sorrowful, hungry and thirsty for justice; they have been wearied to the point of oblivion, almost empty in spirit, they have found danger and despair in trying to make and keep peace in families, neighbourhoods and nations and they have somehow kept their soul healthy, their spirit pure. They know the blessings: the consolation, the earthly inheritance, the satisfaction of knowing justice will prevail, the mercy of God and sometimes of neighbour. They know the kingdom of heaven in their poverty and the kingdom of heaven belongs to them who have suffered and endured for the cause of right. These who have lived and risked and dared and dreamed are saints. We recognize them because they enjoy music. The story of John's Patmos fantasy is full of praise and singing and choirs of angels and music. There is something wrong with a theology that cannot create triumphant music; as well as the comforting psalms and the sensitive divine love songs there has to be the note of *tetelesthai*: the triumphant

cry of Jesus from the cross; it is finished, complete, resolved, done. Hallelujah!

Yes we have suffered from a different kind of triumphalism; the arrogance of the righteous, the prejudice of the powerful who think they are right because they have power, the stirring battle songs to encourage 'marching as to war'. Some of us have moved on: we have learned that we may be called to suffer and die but not to cause suffering and kill. The songs of the saints praise the Lord day and night in his temple. One of the elders asks the question to which he already knows the answer once he thinks about it. 'Who are these that ... Oh yes these are the ones ... of course they are!'

And the ones who we call saints know how to weep. They are not afraid to feel and to express their feelings: if you do not grieve how can you be comforted; if you do not care how can you be a peace maker or hungry and thirsty for justice; if you do not experience the despair of being empty in spirit right to the depths you cannot rejoice, you cannot sing the song of victory.

The saints we remember and give thanks for to-day were human, were unaware of themselves but very aware of the world and could see it as the world Jesus died to save. They pointed all their life to the One beyond, above, inside, deep within 'the one

who never left them nor forsook them', the one who from childhood had wiped away their tears and was always available. The saints always point to God, the God that wipes away our tears.

I met another saint quite by accident. We were waiting in an airport lounge for a delayed flight. He was smartly dressed in a suit, sober tie, briefcase and what was obviously a laptop computer. We both had newspapers but I greeted him affably if distantly and I felt he wanted to chat. We spoke of this and that and then he told me he was returning to his foreign posting after his son's funeral. It was matter of fact businesslike as he explained they had known the lad had inoperable cancer. Though he was only ten he was already a keen sportsman and showed a keen brain. He spoke of how kind everyone was and how much support he got from family and neighbours: and then he looked me in the eye and said 'I was there at the end: I held his hand and he looked at me and smiled: "Good night Dad", he said, "See you in the morning."' "

His eyes misted over and his words stumbled: 'Oh God', he said, 'I can hardly wait for the morning.'

Today we celebrate not just the saints who having suffered and now shine in Glory but we worship and adore the God who wipes away the tears from our eyes. Amen

IT DOES WHAT IT SAYS ON THE TIN!

The Parish: People, Place and Ministry: A Theological and Practical Exploration. Edited by Malcolm Tory (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2004. £14.99. pp. 215. ISBN 1-85311-586-X).

Like a tin of Ronseal this book does what it says on the cover. It is a collection of essays, some inevitably more interesting than others, exploring the parish and the parochial system from a number of different angles. I found it useful in some very practical ways addressing questions of worship; ecumenism and youth work within church life. I found it frustrating and rather disappointing in that there are many assumptions made here about why the parish helps to do the things described and explained.

Given the debate following 'Mission Shaped Church' and the reality of our fractured and changing society, a collection of essays from people who clearly feel strongly about the parish system is helpful. However, for me this book falls between two stools and therefore is not as useful as I had hoped.

It is not practical enough to be a handbook for clergy who are facing similar problems nor is it analytical or conceptual enough to argue for the importance of 'the parish' in the way that seems to be assumed within the pages of this book. What it doesn't seem to recognize is that within the Church of England there are as many different ways of working the parish system almost as there are parishes! I am not sure I understand having read the book with what definition of 'parish' the authors were working. As indeed the editor notes in his introduction when he speaks of 'the ambiguity of the term parish' (p. 7).

I am grateful for the experience and wisdom of the contributors but came away with more questions and confusions than answers.

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