

SERMON

Exodus 20:1-4,7-9,12-20 and Phil 3:4b-14

Law and Gospel

Nunawading and Waverley, 4-10-20

Dear friends in Christ,

When you visit a class room in a primary school, such as at the Lutheran College at Pakenham, you notice amongst the class work and projects a statement about values. It speaks of things offered and received: care, integrity, respect, doing your best, fair go, responsibility, freedom, inclusion, and honesty. They are a little like the Ten Commandments. The school provides learning, acceptance and flourishing and the teachers are there for students' welfare. The children have an obligation too, in showing respect, including others, being responsible etc. I guess, should there be repeated infractions against the values of the school, consequences occur.

As I say, the school values act in the way the commandments do. Both are conditional frameworks. Just as benefits are offered, requirements have to be met. The Ten Commandments acted like a legal document; like Israel's constitution. On the one side, the Lord promised to give himself to Israel: **I am the Lord your God**, he said. He would bless them in their land, support them in famines and pandemics, called plagues, teach them his will, order their society and deliver them from their enemies. On the other side of the contract, the people of God were obliged under the terms of the covenant, to obey the Lord, keep his commandments, **to have no other gods**, ensure fairness and justice prevailed, protect family life and guard the vulnerable and the foreigner from theft and harm.

How does this differ to the new covenant? Our Lord Jesus called his covenant, **the new testament in my blood**, which he established from the institution of the Lord's Supper on what is called Maundy Thursday, through to his crucifixion on Good Friday, his resurrection on Easter Sunday and then his final act, his ascension forty days later. Notice, there is no giving of laws, though we follow Christ in the way he fulfilled the law but God giving his life, his life-blood. Our new ability to follow Christ in the way he behaved, is based on grace, too, the indwelling Spirit who comes in baptism and renews our lives. It is not by law; it is by the gospel. The relationship we have with God the Father is pure grace, not a combination of grace and obligation, or salvation and law keeping, but grace alone.

We don't start with grace and get the rest of the way with our own efforts. The New Testament in Christ's blood is the gospel, not the law.

This is why the apostle Paul talked about his prior life of obedience to the commandments as **rubbish**. He was a good Pharisee, someone who really did his best to follow the commandments down to the minutest detail. **Whatever were gains for me I consider loss for the sake of Christ**, was his conclusion about all those years of effort, including persecution of Christians. It is strange to hear someone saying that a faithful life of keeping the commandments is a complete **loss** and waste. It would be like someone saying, "I have worked hard, been honest in paying bills and taxes, been a good son or daughter, worked voluntarily for a charity, looked after people and acted decently. We wouldn't want to say that is useless to a person's face. It is, indeed, a good way to live but compared to Christ and his gospel of salvation, it is rubbish. Why would Paul talk of **loss and rubbish**? This seems to go against every human instinct.

The answer is in these simple words of Paul: **because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord...not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law** (meaning the Ten Commandments), **but that which is through faith in Christ**. Now here is a peculiar thing. What is the opposite of **faith**? We would think, non-faith, unbelief. No. The opposite of faith is works. Living decently only becomes rubbish in Paul's thinking when we try to use it to establish our relationship with God. Faith is always about knowing Christ and trusting in his actions to save us. Works is relying on what you do under the commandments. It is reliance on oneself rather than giving one's life into the arms of Jesus who can forgive, redeem us and make us right with God.

It all seems so simple. Forget trying to make yourself good in the eyes of the Lord just turn to Jesus and trust in his perfection and his gracious actions to save you. But the class room prevails. Everything we belong to from family, to school, to work, to citizenship, and even friendship is based on the old covenant principle: good things are supplied but you must put in the effort, otherwise the good things are withdrawn. The system conditions our thinking with the resulting danger that we could become little law-keepers, thinking we are in the right. Complete reliance, faith and trust mean we look to someone else, the Saviour, the Son of God, to find that love, acceptance, reconciliation and renewed life.