

A former parishioner of mine in another place once gave me a little gift that she had bought in a flea market or gift shop while on holiday. It was a small wooden plaque on which was written, 'How much can I get away with and still go to heaven!?' Although she was being mischievous and knew that I would find it funny, the inscription on that gift said a lot about her. She was in a sort of 'primary school' stage of Christian faith, which sadly she never really grew out of. Many people are similarly stuck there, never moving beyond a childish understanding of God as a fear-invoking dictator 'up there somewhere' and who requires us to follow strict rules of behaviour. Or else!

Jesus came across this kind of thinking among his contemporaries throughout his ministry. So many people lived in fear of a punishing, vengeful God, in fear of breaking 'the rules,' the precepts of the Jewish Law, which were policed by the ruling class, people like the Pharisees and Scribes who lost no opportunity to catch people out and brand them with the label of 'sinner.' Even those who suffered from various diseases could be called sinners on the supposition that they must have done something wrong, their illness being evidence of divine punishment.

In addition to the requirement of male circumcision, food and purity laws, and other external observances, at the heart of the rules of Jewish faith and identity was the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. They have retained their importance

for Christians, not least because our faith springs from Judaism; and the Jewish scriptures in which those commandments are written form the first and largest part of our Christian Bible.

We had the Ten Commandments as our first reading today. At one time, when the 1662 Book of Common Prayer was the invariable Anglican service manual, they formed the introduction to Eucharistic worship. The priest would read out the commandments in turn, and after each one the people would respond: 'Lord, have mercy upon us, and incline our hearts to keep this law.' After the final commandment was read, they would add, 'write all these thy laws in our hearts, we beseech thee.' I am rather glad to have missed out on that experience as the church of my upbringing had moved on from this rather tortuous provision.

Perhaps it is unfortunate that most of the ancient commandments were written in the negative, as 'you shall not' rather than 'you shall.' But that was the effect of a teaching written initially to a nation that was being formed. It was attempting to create some boundaries that should not be crossed if there was to be harmony and good order in society.

Unfortunately, the 'you shall not' rule encouraged many people to treat the commandments simply as a guide to avoid wrongdoing, as if that is all that is needed to live a good life, even a holy life. Of course, this is a negative concept of

goodness. It is the boast of those who say that they never do anyone any harm. But truly keeping the commandments is about striving to do the opposite of the 'you shall not,' and so do something good, something positive that goes beyond the minimum standard of behaviour or action.

The Gospel reading today reveals how minimum standard or lip service religion had become the order of the day by the time of Jesus. In fact, it was worse than that. The institution of the Temple in Jerusalem had become a symbol of a religion that had lost its way. Jesus was angry with the traders and the money changers because they were content to uphold the rituals and the customs of the faith, but they had no sense of justice. They exploited the people, especially the majority poor, by selling to them animals to offer as sacrifices at prices that the people could barely afford. The merchants were servants of the Temple elite, the chief priests, scribes, and elders who ruled in collaboration with the Roman imperial power. So the Temple, the greatest sign on earth of the presence of the living God had become the centre of corruption and injustice, systemic sin, a 'den of robbers,' no longer authentically serving as the Father's House and the house of prayer for all the people. No wonder Jesus was angry.

Jesus taught and demonstrated a new law or commandment as the authentic way of life for the people of God. It was not really new at all, but as the standard precept of the faith it

had been much watered down over the centuries. Jesus taught that God's laws, the Ten Commandments and other precepts of the Jewish Law, could be summed up in just two essential commandments. They could even be said to be one single commandment because the two parts are inseparable: *You shall love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and you shall love your neighbour, your fellow human being, as yourself.* Jesus is proposing that by living this rule of faith and life sincerely, all the essential written commandments would be observed without people having to think about them.

Jesus presents to us a way of life that transcends rules, laws, and commandments. We are called to live and grow in him, guided by the Spirit of God who sets us free to live in a mutually loving relationship with God, consequently leading us to relate to each other, whoever the other may be, with integrity, compassion, fairness, solidarity, and most of all, love – love in its fullest, unselfish, and inclusive sense.

As we come again to this Eucharist, asking that our lives may be more and more formed into the life of Jesus Christ, may we find the courage and confidence to live, to demonstrate, the faith we profess with our lips. May God's grace enable us to live and grow in a Christian life that comes truly from the heart.

