**Walk it - the gift of grace. 7th March, 2021.**

So now you know where my pre-sermon prayer comes from - the end of our psalm for today. But you will notice also that I subtly change it to include all our hearts - not just mine. And there is, of course, a reason for that.

My thrust this morning is to stress the importance of consistency, or a parallel uniformity between what we say and what we do, and between what we think and believe - and what we say.

If we take a look at the first reading from

Exodus, it’s really not such a big deal for many people to begin with, if they believe in God. Our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters would have no issues with the first five of the ten commandments.

The second five are not quite so comfortable, are they? I, for one, would have to hold my hand up and confess to having broken one or more of the last five commandments at least once, and probably more. I’m also prepared to wager that most, if not all of you, are in the same boat with me. Don’t panic - we’re not all going to hell - although some old-time preachers would have you believe that, but I suggest that they didn’t read their New Testament too carefully, so missed the Good News of Jesus’ grace and forgiveness.

That is imperative to our lives, our very survival, for without Jesus’ sacrifice on the Cross we once again - as I pointed out last Sunday - become lost souls and orphans of the universe, forever separated from our loving God.

But the God of the Old Testament does not often come across as a loving God at all, does He? Here, in verse 4 of Exodus 20, we read that he is ‘…a jealous God, punishing the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me…’ I know it goes on to say that he will ‘…show love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments,’ and I know that I emphasised the importance of taking passages of scripture in context - but note here that the love is **conditional** on loving God back and keeping His rules. That is still not the God of the NT who is prepared to sacrifice himself for us - ‘while we were yet sinners’, showing no love for Him and certainly not following the rules most of the time.

However, what I am keen to show is that none of us is quite as pure and holy as we might like to think, and even though you can see that your brother or sister is worse than you - at least in your eyes - that’s not so in God’s eyes. Remember what Jesus said in Matt 7:5, ‘You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.’ And you know what I dislike about that so much? It’s that the resentment it builds in me for being correct, puts me in double jeopardy. I dare not stray onto legal turf further, lest Douglas’ razor-sharp mind find sufficient evidence for conviction on grounds of diminished responsibility - or some such.

But - to pull myself out of that particular rabbit hole - I would have us focus a moment on the gospel reading, which highlights the hypocrisy of the money lenders and others in the temple courts. They incense Jesus to righteous anger for making idols of money and effectively implying by their very presence that without paying for sacrificial animals, their prayers would not be heard. Also, the outer court of the temple was the only place where Gentiles were allowed to pray. This is entirely analogous to the selling of indulgences, practised by the Roman Catholic Church during the Middle Ages, and spectacularly attacked by Martin Luther.

I have to share with you a version or paraphrase I read of Jesus’ clearing of the temple. It read, ‘Jesus drove out the men selling cattle, sheep and doves with whips…’ Conjures up a lovely image, doesn’t it?

So looking at our Exodus reading and our psalm, we see we are steeped in legalese. I don’t know if any of you have taken the time to read all 176 verses of Psalm 119, but if you have, you may have noticed that almost **every verse,** bar a small handful in such a marathon, refers to God’s laws, statutes, commands, precepts, decrees, words and promises, in a massive acrostic of eight verse stanzas where each of the 8 verses in a stanza starts with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and each stanza takes the next letter of the alphabet until all 22 letters of the alphabet are used. You do the maths - 22 x 8 = 176!

Another rabbit hole - sorry! The reason for mentioning it is that Psalm 19 has a similar emphasis on legality and the the laws of God. Verses 7 to 11 talk of God’s law, statutes, precepts, commands, fear and ordinances, and finishes the section by saying that ‘…in keeping of them there is great reward.’

What Jesus is saying to the people in Jerusalem, and to us across the centuries, is that keeping the law is not what it’s about. The most law-abiding sect in Jesus’ day were the Pharisees who he referred to as ‘white-washed tombs’, in Matthew 23:27,28 he says, ‘Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. **28**In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.’

That’s a pretty harsh indictment for anyone.

And we, are we any better? As I said on the First Sunday in Lent, this is the time to properly ‘clean house’ - turn all the drawers out, lift the carpets and shine the light into the cupboard under the stairs.

This is also a time to refrain from legalistic self-justification because it just doesn’t work. It doesn’t matter how much you know or how often you come to church or go to the synagogue or mosque, it is how you behave in your everyday life that counts. Our message is actually NOT the ten commandments, but the TWO commandments - Love God, and Love your neighbour as yourself. And, Jesus tells us, that if you abide by just these two simple steps, you will fulfil all the other commandments anyway - because it is impossible not to!

So Paul’s injunction to us to stick to the KISS principle - Keep It Simple Stupid - is an encouragement to not feel the necessity to be super smart, to outdo the philosophers of the day, to out-miracle the miracle workers, but to keep to the simple message of Christ crucified and risen - as he writes in 1 Corinthians, 15:17; ‘(And) if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.’ In other words, still under the law, which we have already admitted we haven’t been able to keep.

So what are we to do with this conundrum? We can’t keep the ten commandments too well, we tend towards hypocrisy when we try, and deep down we feel really a bit of a screw-up. Well, I do. And I have found that there’s no way around it - which, in the vernacular, sucks. But there is a way through it, even though it’s a bit painful.

It involves rigorous honesty - yes, again - to make our walk match our talk. And that’s basically it.

A simple concept really - but not truly so difficult to carry out. And the advantages and benefits are astounding.

Just imagine that you could trust every word someone told you; if they said they would do something - they did; if they said something was true - it was; if they gave you something, they didn’t ask for it back; if they loved you, it was real.

And for your part, you would have to be just as reliable; totally trustworthy, utterly honest, earnestly loving - dependable in every way.

I imagine that folks would begin to look at me in a different way - and I would view them in a different light too. There would be more open smiles in the world (when we can see them again!) and less stares over the top of your glasses or backward glances over your shoulder. Less fear, more trust, more love. And all because you did one simple thing - your words and your deeds matched.

And the icing on the cake? That’s when the meditation of your heart matches your words and deeds too. That’s the gift of grace.

Does any of this matter to me or you now, today, in 2021?

I surely hope so, especially now when we can’t see each other’s body language or read their eyes well on zoom. I **need** to be able to trust you - you **need** to be able to trust me. We cannot work together any other way if one goes and talks to another behind their back. Or if I preach to you and don’t really mean it; if my heart is not in tune with God and my words and deeds are not in tune with my heart, I can be of no earthly use to you at all - and certainly no heavenly use either.

Because we biped humans are social animals, we need each other - that’s why God made us the way we are - and because of that we can explore the reality of God and his love for us together. And because God is real, we must be too; that means no facade, no deceits - just plain honest truth. What you see is what you get - Jesus would be happy with that.