

## God's Holy Name and Making Space for God

### Summary Box

In this sermon I reflect on the first four of the ten commandments (Exodus 20:1-17).

*Then God spoke all these words:*

*2 I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 3 **you shall have no other gods before me.***

*4 **You shall not make for yourself an idol,** whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, 6 but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

*7 **You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God,** for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.*

*8 **Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.** 9 For six days you shall labour and do all your work. 10 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. 11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.*

**The first of the four commandments** establish the importance of God as **the one true God** and the necessity of worshipping the one true God and not idols. In addition, the honour due to God's name and the centrality of the sabbath for the people of God, as holy set-apart time.

I relate these commandments to **Jesus' action in the temple**, our Gospel reading for the day (John 2:13-22), when Jesus gets angry at the sellers of cattle and sheep, and turns over the money changers' tables. He says his Father's house should be a house of prayer.

I also reflect on the place of the Cross in the revealing of God's holiness in Jesus, in reference to **1 Corinthians 1:18-25**, a passage about the power of the Cross. I show how we are enabled to participate in the life and thus holiness of God through receiving communion, made possible through Jesus' suffering and death on the Cross.

## Sermon

You've turned up here this morning and in so doing you've made space for God in your life.

That's an amazing thing to have done.

It takes commitment, faithfulness, dedication and resolve to come to church and act as though God matters, to act as though God is real.

It is much easier not to turn up. To stay in bed, or have a lazy morning, go for a walk, or any of the many different ways you could spend a Sunday morning. When society was religious it was easy to turn up, society made it easy for us – everyone went and there was nothing else to do. Not so now. There are any number of things you could be doing on a Sunday morning. But you chose to come here.

You chose to come here. To turn up and see what might happen.

Sometimes, I think we over complicate a life of faith because we presume there's a lot of work to do. There's a lot that we have to achieve, to be better people, to make the world a better place. We must be good, righteous, pure. But, there's something that we're missing if we think that faith is all about striving and doing. **Our readings today re-focus our attention on God and on the work that God does in our lives.**

What is the nature of that work? Well, God starts by clearing some ground for us in the first four commandments. The first four aren't about how humans should treat each other but rather about God's identity and therefore how we should relate to God.

- 1) God's existence is God's responsibility. He makes that clear by acting in history and thereby declaring something about himself (delivering Israel from Egypt). He tells us something about his identity and purpose – He is a Creator God, a God who acts and saves people, and a God who demands fidelity – 'you shall have no other gods but me'.
- 2) God asks us to respect, honour and take note of his action in history and to respect his name. A name that is holy and not to be misused.
- 3) And what is the way that respect should be enacted? Through worshipping the one true God and not idols.
- 4) And the other way that we honour God's name and God's holiness is by marking out a space in the week – one day in fact- as a day when human

activity is stopped, and the focus and attention is given to God. This is the Sabbath day.

As I said, turning up is the majority of the work.

### **Remember the sabbath and keep it holy.**

But, what is holiness?

Holiness isn't primarily about ethical perfection, or goodness, as we might assume. Holiness is essentially a property of God. Michael F Bird writes that holiness: 'overlaps with "righteousness" and "blamelessness" but is not reducible to it. Rather, "the emphasis is not upon a manner of life but upon religious activity and observances which reflect one's dedication or consecration to God.'" Holiness signifies the cultic, spatial, and relational aspects of dedication and devotion to God.'

**In other words, the holiness of God requires that we mark out space and time for God. This isn't about us doing but about us *being with God*. God's holiness requires our response and the first response is to give honour to his name, to demarcate space and time for true worship.**

The first four of the ten commandments are about true worship of the one God (revealed in history and through saving acts) and about giving actual space to God, like building a temple. They are about how God's identity gives meaning and purpose to our lives and they lead on to then how we should treat each other. And this is how the first reading (the 10 commandments) connects to our Gospel reading (the overturning of the tables in the temple) because Jesus is clearing out the clutter, to make space for God. He throws out the cattle sellers and money changers in the temple, and fervently asks people to focus again on giving space to God: 'Stop making my Father's house a market-place!', he says. Jesus clearly shows that his Father's house is important and is set apart for worship and prayer. This set apartness relates to the command around the sabbath day.

The sabbath day, the day of rest is holy, consecrated and blessed, because it mimics God's ways – it takes its cue from the fact that God rested on seventh day, after he had finished his work. **Reflect for a moment on the God who prioritises space and rest as an essential framework for holy living.** I'm not sure if we are able to realise quite what a gift that is. Just stop, says God. Stop and come and rest in my presence, come and worship, come and honour my

name. It reminds me of Selina Stone's description in her book *Tarry Awhile*, our Lent book, about the Sundays of her childhood when all day would be spent tarrying, being with, spending time with God and the community of God in church.

For us the sabbath has morphed into the day of resurrection. The day when we celebrate Christ's victory over death. Our understanding of God has developed as the Trinitarian revelation of God's name was made through the Son and the Spirit. God's holy name was revealed to us in history as Father, Son and Holy Spirit – this is the new part of the story that we get in the New Testament. But it doesn't mean that everything in the Old Testament is somehow obsolete. Not at all, the Son and the Spirit realise what was begun in the Old Testament. Jesus' action in the Temple affirms the importance of honouring God's holy name, of worshipping God and God alone, and leaving time and space for that worship. The endless temptation of human commerce and activity, must be resisted today. Indeed, as Jesus always does, rather than diminishing the holiness described in the Old Testament, he seeks to extend it – *'unless your righteousness exceeds that of the pharisees.....'* and in this instance, the extension is about how his body is transformed into the temple for God's spirit.

'Destroy this temple and I will raise it up in three days' says Jesus. The people around him are incredulous – it's been in construction 46 years. Yet Jesus is talking about his body - Jesus' body is holy and set apart for suffering on the Cross. And through that suffering his body, his holiness is broken and shared with us his followers. We eat holiness together each Sunday. We aren't eating just normal bread and normal wine. We are eating bread and wine that has been set apart, made holy, consecrated, dedicated to God, from God. That is why we act differently around this bread and wine because Jesus was set apart for us, that we might be truly drawn into the holiness of God.

I think we have to recognise, and for some perhaps wrestle with and come to terms with the fact that the Biblical tradition affirms the importance of set apartness as the foundation of God's holiness and therefore of the holiness of God's people. It is set apart for a purpose- not for exclusiveness and indulgence but so that we can be sent out to proclaim the truth. We have to affirm too that God asks us to be with him and spend time with, not just to get on with the work of sorting out the world, or running our lives. Indeed, our time is perhaps what God wants most from us and what we're perhaps least able or willing to give.

Yet, it is only from an encounter with the true otherness of God: God's holiness— mediated through the symbols, words and actions of worship -that we become changed people, ones that can turn with true love and friendship to those beside us and can live different lives Monday to Saturday.

God's otherness is contained in the message of the Cross- a message that reframes human wisdom and human striving. Like God's holiness, the meaning of the cross remains elusive and yet always generative of new understanding and then changed lives. And it is grace that invites us to participate in God's wisdom through fellowship with the Son and through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

For me, coming to church, is akin to going to the theatre – for we suspend our disbelief and enter into a world where miracles happen, where God speaks and his people listen, where there is transformation and the unexpected occurs. This is why the priest traditionally wears special robes and sits apart – not because the priest is better than the people, but because the priest enacts the reality of the faith on behalf of the gathered congregation, the priest takes a specific role in the performance of the faith for God's people. It's why too that our churches are set apart for prayer and worship, dedicated space for God. Six days we go about our normal activities, our commerce, our work and so on. But on the seventh day we rest and we worship the one, true and only God.

#### **Questions for Reflection**

1. How do you respond to the concept of holiness as being about consecration, something set apart?
2. Do you think that the Sabbath/day of rest is an important discipline for Christians?
3. How do you respond to the idea that God wants your time and company prior to any command about how to behave or who to be?
4. What implication for our life at St Paul's might this teaching have?

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