

Everybody needs rules. Kids need rules – sports have rules – games, art, math, science – everything we do seems to happen within a set of ‘guiding principles’ that are either self-evident (day follows night – spring follows winter) – or imposed by someone (Dr Naismith ‘invents’ basketball – processes for manufacturing – etc)

Most of the time we follow the rules without even thinking about it. Sometimes we need reminding. Life can be complicated and the rules can change according to the circumstances. Who knows that better than humans living through a 21st century pandemic...We are being guided by rules that hope to preserve resources and protect lives - we know these rules have our best interests at their centre, but that hasn't stopped people from bending and breaking those rules for reasons that defy understanding - and it hasn't stopped authorities from selectively applying the rules out of their own self-interest.

People of faith know a thing or two about rules - rules about food; rules about rest; rules about which days are holy and what things are sacred - religions are full of rules. And for some, these are the top ten. This list from Exodus - so important it is repeated in Deuteronomy - so important they are ‘written in stone.’

These rules are meant to orient God's people in God's direction and then to use that orientation to foster good relationships with one another. And what I find interesting about the commands as Exodus presents them is the explanation that comes with the first five. These are reminders - perpetual history lessons on the power of God. God is described as deliverer; one who holds perpetual memory; whose name itself (I AM) is not to be used lightly, for it is a source of great power. We are also reminded of the complex majesty of Creation - all of which is under God's control; all of which springs from God's creative imagination; all of which is sacred, and honoured by a day of rest and thanksgiving.

Five commandments that contain an abridged history of God's people from Creation to Exodus. Five rules that define God for us.

But that's not all.

The rest, while they concern our behaviour toward one another, also suggest something about the world as God imagines it. These commands cover behaviors' that harm relationships and mock the 'goodness' of the Created order: Don't mistreat your parents. Don't murder, don't cheat, don't steal, don't be greedy.

No explanation is needed, because failure to obey these rules have direct and personal consequences. The harm is self-evident.

We might wonder why - though armed with such precise, direct rules for behaviour - we still seem to be tearing the world and each other to pieces. The rules (such as they are) have been with us for millennia. If it wasn't enough to have them carved in stone, Jesus summed them up neatly a mere 2000 years ago by asking us to "love God and love our neighbour as ourselves." The principles are simple enough; why is the practice of keeping those rules so difficult?

Well, mostly it's because whatever good intentions there are in the rules, they can become a means of wielding power. Self-interest features strongly when we consider which rules to follow, and which to ignore. Rules are bent or broken to gain advantage (and so the spirit of our original 'top ten' is ignored.) Sadly, some rules are designed that serve only the rule-makers. The desire to divide the world into discrete groups provides us the opportunity to alter rules to suit our circumstances, and once again, Jesus jumps in to the story to draw attention to the mess we make of things.

The temple cleansing episode in John's Gospel is about rules being twisted beyond recognition. A place of worship has become a forum for commerce. The equity of Creation - each in the image of God; all with the same 'rules' that remind them of who God is and what Holy means - has been distorted (in Jesus day) by a system of sacrifice that was making some rich at the expense of those who wished to 'worship according to the rules.' Only certain kinds of birds could be offered - and you could buy them on the steps of the sanctuary. Only certain coins could go in the plate - and you exchanged them (at exorbitant rates) in the fellowship hall.

The rules of the day had become distorted, favouring those who had the power to set them. So Jesus makes a scene. Jesus frees the animals and breaks up the currency exchange. Jesus does what Jesus came to do - draw attention back to the bedrock principals that were meant to be a kind of constitution for the people under God's rule, the premise of which is to be mindful of God and one another - to the benefit of all. Shouldn't the pursuit of that end be easy?

Love God - Love one another - Love yourself; if our actions were guided by those three principles, wouldn't things be better? The kingdom of God is no less than a place where people will be mindful of these important relationships. Rules that divide - rules that restrict - rules that propose precedence of one group over another - these are where the trouble is. Even rules that help us decide who is bad and who is good are problematic. Our understanding too often focuses on the consequences for rule breakers. But rules that foster fear are troublesome, and rules that manipulate power are oppressive. The rules of faith are meant to liberate, not to bind.

Moses is celebrated for 'bringing the law' - for teaching the rules of faith to God's people. Jesus condensed those ancient rules into a 'golden rule,' yet still we struggle to understand. Our liberation awaits, God's kingdom is very near to us, waiting in the love that guides the rules we are called to live by.

May we soon be truly free. May God's kingdom come quickly.