

## MORNING SERVICE

15 March 2009, Kilcalmonell, Killean & Kilchenzie

*3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent*

*Communion in Killean & Kilchenzie*

*preacher: Rev Martin Grashoff*

*hymns: Church Hymnary. Fourth Edition (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005)*

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### Welcome & Intimations

**Opening Hymn** : 'Thou hidden love of God' (CH 188)

### Prayer

**Readings** : Exodus 20:1-21 (own translation) & John 2:13-17 (*Good News Bible*)

*(Exodus 20:1-21:)*

- 1 God speaks all these words, saying:
- 2 I am the ONE, God-for-you,  
who brought you out of the land of Egypt,  
out of the house of slavery.
- 3 You shall not have with you  
other gods, before me.
- 4 You shall not make for yourself  
carved images or any likeness of anything  
that is in the heavens above  
or on the earth beneath  
or in the waters under the earth.
- 5 You shall not bow down to them  
and you shall not serve them,  
because I,  
the ONE, God-for-you, am an impassioned God  
visiting the iniquity of the parents on the children  
to three and four generations  
of those who hate me.
- 6 but showing steadfast love to thousand generations  
of those who love me  
and keep my commandments.
- 7 You shall not call on the Name  
of the ONE, God-for-you,  
in a deceitful manner;  
for the ONE will not clear one  
who calls on the Name deceitfully.
- 8 Remember the sabbath day – *day of rest*,

by keeping it holy;  
9 six days you may labour  
and do all your work,  
10 but the seventh day  
is a sabbath for the ONE, God-for-you;  
you shall not do any work –  
you, your son or daughter,  
your male or female slave, your cattle,  
nor the wanderer-guest who is within your settlements.  
11 For in six days the ONE has made  
the heavens and the earth,  
the sea and everything in them,  
but he rested on the seventh day;  
therefore  
the ONE has blessed the sabbath  
and made it holy.

12 Honour your father and your mother,  
so that your days may be long  
on the soil  
that the ONE, God-for-you gives you.

13 You shall not murder;  
14 you shall not commit adultery;  
15 you shall not steal;  
16 you shall not answer regarding your neighbour  
as a witness who lies;  
17 you shall not covet your neighbour's house  
you shall not covet your neighbour's wife,  
or his male or female slave, or his ox or his donkey,  
or anything that is your neighbour's.

18 And all the people see it:  
the thunder and the lightning ,  
the voice of the rams' horn  
and the smoking mountain;  
the people see it and they fall back  
and stand at a distance.

19 They say to Moses  
'You speak to us, and we will hear;  
but do not let God speak to us,  
lest we will die.'

20 Moses says to the people,  
'Do not be afraid;  
for  
only in order to test you  
God has come,

and in order  
that the awe of him may be with you  
so that you do not go astray.’

<sup>21</sup> The people remain at a distance;  
and Moses enters the thick cloud  
where God is.

**Hymn** : ‘Jesus Christ is waiting’ (CH 360)

### **Sermon**

Today’s readings may appear to be a bit grim. They seem to be full of absolute statements, unreachable targets, overzealous teaching and in general a strong sense of fear. Well, the other day I came across a nice quote from Richard Dawkins, saying:

*The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction.*<sup>1</sup>

Apart from Mr Dawkins being cheeky, he also seems to lack basic knowledge about Christian faith in general and the Bible in particular. The Christian tradition has always emphasized the unity of God, and therefore rejected a division between God in the Old Testament and God in the New Testament. Actually, the New Testament cannot even exist without the Old, as Jesus teaches us through his continuous references to Law and Prophets and his many quotations from Psalms. The ancient theologian who did dare to make the division, Marcion, was rightly excommunicated, and perhaps he is one of the very few heretics who really threatened Christian faith.<sup>2</sup> (Most heretics only ask questions the Church would rather not hear.)

Still, Dawkins does make a point. Although Christian theology always kept Old and New Testament together in order to avoid any division in God, Christian practice – or rather: not all too well Christian practice – did the opposite. All the things that seemed harsh, demanding or whimsical about God were outplayed against the message of Jesus about God as a loving Father. To be honest, many Christians still do – thus secretly rejecting the Old Testament as something that was overruled by the New. (That, by the way, is why you will find separate New Testaments beside your bed in hospitals or hotels – a serious misunderstanding of the Bible’s unity.) But the loving God who gets exclusively attached to Jesus, is very much present in the whole of the Old Testament. And if we honestly read the things Jesus says about the judgment of the nations,<sup>3</sup> or about God sending people into torture or eternal punishment,<sup>4</sup> God is very much as he is in these Old Testament parts we rather skip.

The truth is that God cannot be caught in any vision or picture or theology. Who God is, emerges from actual experiences of actual people. And these are many and manyfold.

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<sup>1</sup> On a sticker intended to be put up in buses and subways, made by the Freedom From Religion Foundation: [http://ffrf.org/news/2009/madison\\_buscampaign.php](http://ffrf.org/news/2009/madison_buscampaign.php).

<sup>2</sup> Marcion lived in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century and was excommunicated by the church of Rome in 144. His canon was the briefest ever, containing only ten Epistles from Paul and the Gospel of Marcion.

<sup>3</sup> Eg. Matthew 25:31-46.

<sup>4</sup> Eg. Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43; 18:23-35; 21:33-41; 24:45-51; 25:14-30.

God is the ONE who calls some to devote their lives to the liberation of their people. People like Nelson Mandela, for example. Why do they do that? Basically, because they know they cannot refuse that call. It stems from something deeper or greater than they themselves. A God who chooses the side of the oppressed cannot be a wimpish wally, since injustice needs to be dealt with.

God is also the ONE who heals and comforts widows and orphans after a war – though that cannot be taken for granted. God can give hope and healing to the little ones who are in danger of being caught by powers they cannot control. A God who comforts, is a loving God.

God can be the ONE who brings understanding, wisdom and compassion to those who are open to learn. A lot of that is simply something people share among themselves, human experience. But every now and again they hint at something beyond our understanding, push us beyond our own limited amount of compassion. This is a God who can take you by surprise.

Now it may sound as if I seem to know quite some things about God. Really, I don't. All I do is sharing things others have experienced or done. Something of the God who calls us to fight injustice and challenge lies, I can recognize in my own life – but I'm not a Nelson Mandela. Something of the God who teaches us wisdom is familiar to me too – but I'm not a Meister Eckhart or Abraham Heschel. Personally I don't have much with a God who comforts me – but to be honest, even if healing comes through our own effort and mutual support, than still I find the sheer possibility of it a true miracle.

As multicoloured and many-sided as humans and their experiences are, so is God. And by definition always greater than that. The spirituality of my great-grandparents was quite honest on that: for them God was so unthinkably great, that they themselves were less than a speck of dust (and lost in sin anyway). But! This God might be impossible to understand, it certainly was a loving God, simply because Jesus had told so. So their awe for God's greatness was balanced by their trust in God's unconditional love.

This is why the commandments God gives are so great. We are not asked or expected to know God, or even this world. As some Jews say, we do not even have to believe in God – as long as we do what God asks. The commandments are not a ruler or a tape measure for exposing our failures. They are a practical way to find where God calls, comforts or teaches us, in daily life.

Commandments come with requirements. If you want to make it work, you will have to make a serious effort. They can challenge or even accuse you. But they will work once we dare to go beyond what it literally says. That is where we find passion and zeal to take us further.

As happened to Jesus in the temple. Cleaning the temple from those who were absolutely necessary for bringing the daily sacrifices according to the Torah, is a very

strange thing to do. But sometimes breaking the rules is needed to bring the rules back to life again. Jesus is certainly not trying to abolish the commandments, but he wants people to make more out of them than only the obligatory religious duties.

Is God an 'unpleasant character'? Was Jesus an obnoxious prophet? These questions just miss the point. Real life is not about having a nice time. Nice times are the bonuses, and we should be very fond of them. But meanwhile we should better get on with these commandments, even if we lack the zeal of Jesus. Because God knows what we do.

Amen.

***(In Killean & Kilchenzie:)***

**Affirmation of Faith**

**Communion Hymn** : 'Let us build a house' (CH 198)

***(In Kilcalmonell:)***

**Hymn** : 'Be still' (CH 189)

**Prayer of Intercession**

***(In Killean & Kilchenzie:)***

**Invitation**

**Narrative**

**Prayer of Thanksgiving**

**The Lord's Prayer**

**Prayer of Consecration**

**Communion**

**Prayer after Communion**

**Closing Hymn** : 'How can I ever thank the Lord' (CH 76)

**Blessing**