

18th after Trinity 4 October 2026 Coventry Cathedral

Exodus 20: 1-4, 7-9, 12-20, Philippians 3: 4b-14, Matthew 21. 33-end

Our readings today may be very familiar to many of us, particularly the first one. Some of us will be old enough to remember being taught the Ten Commandments in Sunday School. In many Victorian schools and chapels the commandments were writ large on the walls, they formed the backbone of the Judeo-Christian tradition. But before we unpack the reading from Exodus and then later Matthew's Gospel, I want to provide some context by taking us back into Genesis.

Genesis chapter 2 tells us that in the Garden of Eden there were two trees. The Tree of Life and The Tree of Knowledge. It's in Genesis 2 that we read of the first ever commandment, given to Adam. "And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you may not eat'". Notice that Adam could therefore eat from the Tree of Life. In other words this wasn't so much a commandment as a blessing. He was offered life as opposed to the death that would come from eating of the Tree of Knowledge.

In the arc of salvation history, this is the first time we encounter God offering an invitation into wisdom. Following God's commands, or put another way, accepting God's blessing, leads to life whilst choosing to follow our own instincts and preferences leads to a dead end. So bearing this in mind, let's move to Exodus.

The passage begins with a declaration. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." Before God asks anything of the people, God reminds them who God is and what God has done. The commandments are not given as conditions for God's love, that has already been proven. They are given as a response to God's liberation. The Israelites have been set free from slavery and now must learn how to live as a free people.

This is important because the Ten Commandments are most often understood as rules but they are really about relationships. They are about how a liberated people remain free because, as Walter Brueggemann observes in his wonderful book, *Sabbath as Resistance*, liberation is not a one-time event. The habits of slavery have a way of following us even after we have left Egypt. Pharaoh may be left behind, but Pharaoh's values often remain lodged in our hearts.

The world of Pharaoh is a world of endless production, accumulation, and anxiety. It is a world where worth is measured by achievement, where people are valued for what they produce, and where everyone must compete for their share. Pharaoh's economy creates fear because fearful people are easier to control.

God's commandments offer a radically different vision. They teach Israel to trust that there is enough because God is enough and that life is not sustained by endless acquisition but by covenant faithfulness. The Sabbath command, sitting at the heart of the commandments, becomes an act of resistance against every system that says our value lies in our productivity. To stop, to rest, to worship, to trust, is to declare that Pharaoh is not in charge. God is.

This challenge is not confined to ancient Egypt. We live in a culture that often tells us that we are what we earn, what we achieve, what we own, or how successful we appear. Even within the Church we can adopt the same assumptions. We become busy, anxious, driven and exhausted. We worry that unless we are constantly producing, the world or the church will somehow fall apart.

Whilst today we might argue that we are no longer oppressed by an external Pharaoh, I would argue that our culture has internalised Pharaoh's voice to

continually demand more. More success, money, influence and recognition. Western economies are obsessed with economic growth and, as a consequence are pushing our planet's limits to the extreme. So, I want to suggest that the commandments remain utterly relevant whilst at the same time being surprisingly counter cultural. They call us to place God at the centre of all aspects of our lives. Worship God alone and honour God's name. Keep holy time and honour relationships. Do not covet what belongs to another, instead live differently.

That challenge echoes through the parable Jesus tells in Matthew's gospel. A landowner plants a vineyard, provides everything necessary for its flourishing, and entrusts it to tenants. When harvest time comes, he sends servants to collect the fruit. Instead of responding with gratitude and faithfulness, the tenants respond with violence. They beat one servant, kill another, stone a third. Finally, they kill the son, imagining that by seizing the inheritance they can possess the vineyard for themselves.

The tragedy of the tenants is that they forget who the vineyard belongs to. They begin as stewards but over time believe themselves to be entitled and so tell themselves that really the vineyard should belong to them, given that they've looked after it for so long.

That is often humanity's fundamental temptation. We receive God's gifts and then convince ourselves that they belong entirely to us. Look at what we've collectively done to creation, to the world's resources, to the use of power. Just like the tenants our modern age wants the vineyard without the owner, the fruit of the earth without any accountability and the inheritance without the relationship. The parable is addressed initially to the religious leaders of Jesus' day, but its challenge extends far beyond them. Whenever we take God's gifts and detach them from God, we become like those tenants. Whenever we seek control rather than trust and possession rather than stewardship, we're walking the same path.

The commandments and the parable both ask us the same question: who is really at the centre of our lives? The commandments begin by warning against idols. We often think of idols as carved statues, but modern idols are usually far more sophisticated. An idol is anything that claims our ultimate loyalty. It can be money, status, security, ideology, nationalism, consumption, success, even religion.

Going back to Brueggemann's book, he argues that Sabbath is resistance precisely because it dismantles idols. When we stop working, buying, and striving, we acknowledge a truth that idols can never admit: the world is held together by God's grace and not our efforts. The tenants in the

vineyard can't make that leap of faith. They can't trust the generosity of the owner. Their imaginations have become shaped by scarcity, competition and fear. They act with violence because they believe that unless they seize everything, they will have nothing.

As we read of increasing escalation in wars around the globe, unrest on the streets of Northern Ireland and France and a pilot attempting to crash a plane, these readings are shown to be as relevant to us as they were to those who first heard them. We too live in a culture shaped by fear and scarcity. We are constantly told there is not enough. Not enough resources, time and security. Yet scripture persistently tells a different story. It tells the story of a God who creates abundance from wilderness, who feeds people with manna, who brings water from a rock, who multiplies loaves and fishes, who raises the dead, and who gives life beyond all expectation.

The other reading set for today is from Paul's letter to the Philippians chapter 3, which we've not heard but I do want to reference it because it is so relevant. Paul lists all the things he once relied upon; his heritage, achievements, religious credentials and his status. If anyone could have built an identity around accumulation and accomplishment, it was Paul. Yet he comes to see it all differently. "Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ." Paul discovers a freedom that

neither Pharaoh nor the tenants can imagine. His identity no longer rests on possessing, achieving or controlling. It rests on belonging to Christ.

Because of that, he is free to let go and to live with open hands.

The commandments call us into that freedom, that freedom that was initially given to Adam as a blessing. The parable warns us what happens when we refuse it and Paul shows us what it looks like when a life is truly centred on God. None of these passages are about restriction. They're about liberation. God's purpose is not to make life smaller but larger. The commandments protect and deepen freedom.

When we worship God alone, we are freed from idols. When we keep Sabbath, we are freed from endless striving. When we remember that the vineyard belongs to God, we are freed from the burden of pretending we own and control everything. When we count all things loss beside the surpassing value of knowing Christ, we are freed from the exhausting task of proving our worth.

The invitation offered by these readings is very simple. To remember who God is and whose world this is. To remember that we are not owners but stewards, not slaves but beloved children, not competitors in a scarcity-driven economy but participants in God's abundant kingdom.

So let's pray that we might have the courage to resist the pharaohs of our own age, the humility to remember that the vineyard belongs to God, and may we, with Paul, press on towards the goal, finding our life not in what we own, achieve or control, but in the One who has already claimed us as his own.

Amen.