

# Return to Paradise?

## First Things First

Readings: Deuteronomy 6:4-12; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

What do you think of as Paradise? Blue skies, beaches, no work may come quickly to mind. If we were to think about it longer we would perhaps start to think about concepts such as freedom, freedom from injustice and freedom from sorrow.

I can be reasonably sure that none of us, as we think of paradise would be thinking of how the way the world is now. In the media we hear of murder in the street, terrorism and chronic poverty we have this abiding sense not just that this is not good, but that this is not how things are supposed to be. We have that sense deep within that points us to a different type of world, a world that is put right.

Today as we consider the first commandment we will see that it is the start of the path to the Bible's picture of paradise, as we put first things first and put God in his rightful place and let nothing take his place.

### **SHALOM: THE BIBLE'S VIEW OF PARADISE**

The Bible starts with a wonderful vision of paradise. It has everything in its right place, all the relationships are right, man with woman, humanity with creation, and humanity with God. It is God's world, his authority and care is understood and there is peace. The Bible's word for this is Shalom, peace in the fullness of that word, not just the absence of war, but a world at rights.

But then Shalom is shattered, peace is perverted.

This happens when humanity seeks to take God's place and ignore his authority as it seeks to make up its own mind as to what is right or wrong but quickly shows it doesn't know its' "right from its left". The Bible in its opening narratives then clearly shows what is at the heart of the problems of this world, God has been removed from his rightful place and this is the end of paradise. Here is the Biblical heart of sin, not putting God in his rightful place.

The rest of the story of the Bible is God's gracious plan to restore Shalom, to restore his creation. That plan works its way out through the people of Israel. God saves his people from Egypt pledging to bring them to the Promised Land, which is described in terms reminiscent of Eden. They are to be his people representing God to the world and pointing the way back to Paradise. It is no surprise then that his first command to them is this. "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:2-3).

If paradise is to be restored, if the people are to show the nations how life is to be lived they have to put first things first and put God in his rightful place in their lives and in their nations. The first step back to paradise is to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

Last week I spoke about my Star Trek cuff links, you will have to listen to last week's sermon to know why, but I keep thinking if you will excuse the pun, links between Star Trek and the 10 Commandments. In the Star Trek world there is what is known as the Prime Directive which governs all the Federation's activities and actions. Well here is the Biblical prime directive. Put first things first, recognise the place that God should have in our lives. It is not that we give God authority in our lives, we recognise the authority that he already has, and let nothing take his place.

## LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD AND NO OTHER GODS

### The Advantage of One God

I don't know if you have ever thought how grateful we should be that we are monotheists, that we believe in one God who alone should be worshipped. It makes knowing what to do so much easier.

I have for many years trained my children's soccer teams. I am the one who is to instruct them, tell them what to do. The problem is that I am not the only one from the sidelines yelling, I may be the loudest but I am not the only one. Some will be yelling go forward, others go back, shoot, pass and it can be rather confusing for the players. It would be much easier if all they could hear was the coach.

Cultures which believe in many gods similarly have a difficult time, they have to act one way in one place, another way in a different, constantly working out which god they have to keep happy. We don't have to do that. Thank God!

### Getting God right

This does however raise the issue of making sure that we get God right, that we are believing the right God. The first commandment makes sure that the Israelites understood who God was, he was the God who had showed his mighty power in saving them from Egypt.

This week's cartoon suggests that the 10 Commandments could be known as "God for Dummies", and this is not such a bad description. For we see in the Commandments the type of God that we believe in. He is not just the only God, but a God interested in our welfare, in our families, in truth, in justice, in faithfulness. The Commandments reveal the nature of our God and it is this God that we are to hold above all others.



"'Ten Commandments' sounds too stuffy. How about 'God for Dummies'?"

We see the nature of God even more clearly in Jesus where the God we believe in is fully revealed, here we see God in all his love, compassion, mercy and grace. This is the God that we are to place above all others.

Moreover in Jesus we see the God who is fully revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Father who made us all, the Son who died to save us, and the Spirit who is the presence of God with us. We believe in the God of creation, the God of resurrection, the God of Pentecost.

Each week as we say the Creed we are reminding ourselves of the God we believe in, the God we are to put above all others, that we are to love with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. It is wonderful today that we are going to baptise an adult and two children into this Trinitarian faith. We have the opportunity, each of us, to put this God in the right place in our lives and let nothing take his place.

## REBELS AGAINST GOD

However we all find this so difficult to do, as we hear the great commandment read we know we do not keep it, and there are a number of ways we don't.

### Atheism

There is for some the allure of atheism, a position being declared with increasing passion recently. This is not the time to fully interact with this position, however I have to say that I admire their faith. This is not just a quip, for they have to firmly believe that there is no meaning in life, as proponents as far back as Bertrand Russell have said. This means they not only reject the idea of a god, but also they have to reject that sense

of this is not how things are supposed to be, not just a recognition that things are bad, but that things should not be this way. I just don't have enough faith to reject that witness of my own conscience and feelings.

### **Prosperity**

"Atheism", however, as Francis Bacon observed, "is rather in the life than in the heart of man." We may be good God fearing Christians but we become practical atheists in that we simply forget God as we go about our business. The Bible is well aware of this danger. In Deuteronomy, as Moses speaks to Israel before they enter the Promised Land, he reminds them of the Commandments and warns them that when they have all the land offers then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. (Deuteronomy 6:10-12).

Likewise for us the very prosperity that we enjoy, which is such a blessing of God, may make us practical atheists, we simply ignore God.

### **The Threat of Nothing**

There is not only the threat of prosperity, of our material possessions, there is the threat of *Nothing*. In C.S. Lewis' "The Screwtape Letter", the senior devil tells the junior tempter, Wormwood, that the man he is responsible for can be drawn from God by Nothing.

"Nothing is very strong: strong enough to steal away a man's best years not in sweet sins but in a dreary flickering of the mind over it knows not what and knows not why, in the gratification of curiosities so feeble that the man is only half aware of them, in drumming of fingers and kicking of heels, in whistling tunes that he does not like, or in the long dim labyrinth of reveries that have not even lust or ambition to give them relish, but which once chance association has started them, the creature is too weak and fuddled to shake off. ... The only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man from the Enemy ... Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick."

The best way to make sure that we don't love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength is not to put something in God's place but is to make sure that there is nothing that we love that way. Keep everything small, trivial, unimportant. Then *Nothing* will have replaced God.

We live in a culture that glorifies *Nothing*. We fill our lives with so much *Nothing*. We meander through malls, make small talk, we get to know TV characters better than we know our own family. Entertainment moves from a diversion from life to the business of life. The weight loss of a reality TV contestant is more important than job losses, *The Voice* more important than those who have voice, and our new becomes just another form of entertainment. We are as Neil Postman so memorably put it "Amusing ourselves to death". The *Nothing* has triumphed and God is marginalised and forgotten and Shalom continues to be vandalised, perverted and destroyed. *Nothing* blinds us to our Creator, makes us dumb in praising our Saviour and deaf to the prompting of the Spirit.

The first commandment is a stark and blunt reminder to change our ways, to put first things first, to put God in his rightful place, and not let *Nothing* take his place.

### **A Solution?**

How can we do this? We need to have reminders to put God in his rightful place. Coming to Church is of course, where week by week we are reminded that we have not loved God with our whole heart, and are reminded of who God is, and how he has wonderfully saved and forgiven us.

Be regular in Bible reading and prayer, these activities force us to think about. Start each day thanking God for sending Jesus, ask for wisdom for the day and to keep in step with the Spirit. Say the Lord's Prayer, it puts God in his rightful place. All of this will help to live the way God calls us to in all areas of our life as we, as the monks put it, "practice the presence of God."

Perhaps most importantly remember Paradise. Paradise will come, one day God's will will be done on earth as it is in heaven, Shalom will be restored. The resurrection of Jesus assures of this. And we can be part of that paradise, the Spirit is the deposit of God's future. We will not get there by keeping the 10 Commandments, which is just as well as we don't even keep the first one. We get there remembering that he is the God who has saved us despite our rebellion and he will bring us there. It is when we grasp that hope, when we feel that gratitude and joy of knowing that we have eternal life that we will want to put God first we will want to play our part in restoring shalom in our lives, in our community and in our world.

So let us with all our heart, soul, mind and strength love our God, Father, Son and Spirit.