



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2024

Readings: *Exodus 20.1-10; Psalm 19; I Corinthians 1.18-25; John 2.13-22*

*Lent III*

In the words of today's Psalmist, 'Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.'<sup>1</sup>

Which of us is unfamiliar with living according to rules and regulations; with recommendations and guiding principles? We have already spent a moment with the **Ten Commandments**, and of course with the **Highway Code**, amusingly popularised in 1966 by the Master Singers, setting it to Anglican chant: 'Where there is a pav-e-ment or ade-quate footpath, use it.' 'Take extra care if your view is limited: by sta-ti-on-ary vehicles or other ob-struc-ti-ons.'<sup>2</sup>

The life and work of the **United Reformed Church** is given good order by its *Manual*,<sup>3</sup> where there is much to assist in the running of a church – the fundamentals of Christian belief, the roles of Church Meetings, Elders' Meetings and Synods, the words to be used on occasions like ordinations and inductions, and so on. There are also sets of *Guidelines on conduct and behaviour for Ministers of the Word and Sacraments* and of *Elders*.<sup>4</sup>

What about **Parliamentary procedure**? Policies for that are also detailed,<sup>5</sup> as the nineteenth century Erskine May shows.<sup>6</sup> Whether or not we feel its language and customs are more reminiscent of another era, there is meaning and purpose in their combination of historic understanding which maybe dates from as far back as the 13<sup>th</sup> century, but is not written down, of Standing Orders, and of Rulings from the Chair ... however perilous they may be.

And the **conduct of war** is to be shaped by International Humanitarian Law, the main purpose of which is to maintain some humanity in armed conflicts, saving lives and reducing suffering. These rules of war include: no targeting of civilians; no torture or inhumane treatment of detainees; no attacking of hospitals and aid workers; providing safe passage for civilians to flee; providing access to humanitarian organizations; and intending no unnecessary or excessive loss and suffering.<sup>7</sup> The Geneva Conventions, which are at the core of these rules of law, have been ratified, most unusually, by all 196 states. And there are consequences if war crimes are committed, either by states or individuals. Ultimately, rules for the conduct of war aim to maintain dignity, and to ensure that living together again is possible after the last bullet has been shot.

It is not difficult to see how these guidelines, for the road, the church, for parliament, and for war are all well, positively motivated: they aim to create that order which undergirds community and life, and they aspire to the common good. In Psalm 19 – words from which punctuate the entirety of this service, right through to the second postlude – the writer finds God's commandments to be deeply helpful, even pleasurable; they are 'more to be desired than gold' and 'sweeter than honey'.<sup>8</sup> They do not earn us God's love – of course keeping them does not do that; God only loves us because it is

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 19.14

<sup>2</sup> To chants by William Henry Havergal 1793-1870 and Edward John Hopkins 1818-1901

<sup>3</sup> See United Reformed Church website, available at <https://urc.org.uk/general-assembly-executive-assembly-committees/general-assembly/the-manual/> Accessed 1<sup>st</sup> March 2024

<sup>4</sup> See United Reformed Church website, available at <https://urc.org.uk/urc-ministries/guidelines-on-conduct-and-behaviour-for-ministers-of-word-and-sacraments/> Accessed 1<sup>st</sup> March 2024

<https://urc.org.uk/urc-ministries/guidelines-on-conduct-and-behaviour-for-elders/> Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2024

<sup>5</sup> Available at <https://www.parliament.uk/site-information/glossary/parliamentary-procedure/>, accessed 1<sup>st</sup> March 2024

<sup>6</sup> Erskine May, Thomas 1844 *Treatise on the Law, Privileges, Proceedings and Usage of Parliament*. For the current and 25<sup>th</sup> edition see, <https://erskinemay.parliament.uk/> Access 1<sup>st</sup> March 2024

<sup>7</sup> From the website of National Public Radio, available at <https://urc.org.uk/urc-ministries/guidelines-on-conduct-and-behaviour-for-elders/> Accessed 28<sup>th</sup> February 2024

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 19.10

God's gracious desire to do so – but gladly honouring God's way as it is spelled out in God's law is the most worthy response we can make to that unmerited grace of God.

At the same time, not everything is always sweetness and gold. We might engage with laws – even the commandments of God – rather more passionately. If, in peacetime, laws are to ensure that everyone is treated justly, or, in war, that civilians have opportunity to flee to safety, then seeing such laws *not* being upheld might well stir heated debate and demonstration. After all, think of what we heard of Jesus' behaviour in the Temple. A place designed for the worship of God and for prayer has become a marketplace, and he really doesn't like it. You see, the Temple stood as a dwelling place for the presence and the glory of God; there, in the Temple, the people found God's law enshrined, God's mercy offered, and God's covenant love promised. St John's Gospel ponders the Temple, too. It stresses how Jesus dwells in the Father and the Father dwells in him – the word so often used is 'abide'.<sup>9</sup> So, Jesus and the Temple are theologically and emotionally connected. Maybe we are not surprised, therefore, that Jesus feels this abuse of the Temple deeply personally: 'Stop making my Father's house – not *the* Father's house, but *my* Father's house - a market-place!' <sup>10</sup>

It's an offence to him for what he represents to us of God. Might that apparently angry response help us understand why *we* can react so intensely when we see the flouting of laws that matter to us? Ask yourself: what personal commitments and convictions stir my animus when I become aware of an ill being perpetrated or a need being neglected? If we have made a legacy to the Cats' Protection League, we will be predictably incensed by cruelty to felines. If our heritage or intimate circle is Jewish or Muslim, we will be reacting to the news of Israeli detainees and of Gazan civilians. If erosion associated with climate change threatens our own home, we'll take it personally. If our own mental health challenges, or a loved one's, are chronically re-shaping life, we will have a feel for such things – a feel which is less instinctive in those who do not.

That said, surely we don't only clamour for the upholding of laws when we are affected ourselves? Sheer human compassion can stir deep-seated reactions when we see human rights trampled upon, or suffering exacted. Yes, the news can give us a leaden weight in the gut; a feeling of helplessness can be real; compassion fatigue can supplant our altruism. We can find ourselves identifying with T. S. Elliot as he muses, 'human kind cannot bear very much reality.'<sup>11</sup> But such human frailty in the face of such human suffering and imperfection is precisely why we do not draw solely upon our own resources to bear and counter society's ills.

For the Christian, the perfect pattern is Jesus himself. Yes, the cross can seem to be foolishness and a stumbling block. Why wouldn't it seem to be foolishness and a stumbling block? It's gratuitous suffering, to the degree that Jesus cries, 'My God, why have you forsaken me?' <sup>12</sup> In truth, its cruelty is awful enough that the cross has left many people unable to trust in the God of whom it speaks. And yet that cross proclaims to the world that only such self-sacrificing love is the answer. Moreover, the empty tomb trumpets the truth of the resurrection, that such 'love beyond the uttermost' <sup>13</sup> cannot be defeated. That is how God saves the world; and that is how those who walk with God 'the way of holiness' <sup>14</sup> will serve God's saving purposes in the world, by themselves being a temple to God's presence and to the power of God's love. <sup>15</sup>

St Paul challenges us with the counter cultural logic that there will be no end to today's crises – be they crises of war, of how to vote in upcoming elections, of how to respect one another's identity, or of how to treat the planet - until the strength of vulnerability and weakness is understood, the impotence of brute force is accepted. Don't the conflicts in Israel and Palestine, in Ukraine, and in Darfur prove that point? War, in the waging of which International Humanitarian Law is ignored, is not rescuing,

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<sup>9</sup> e.g. John 15.4

<sup>10</sup> John 2.16b

<sup>11</sup> Eliot, T. S. *Burnt Norton*, Part i of the first of *Four Quartets* (1941)

<sup>12</sup> Psalm 22.1

<sup>13</sup> Fred Pratt Green 1903-2000, from the hymn *An upper room did our Lord prepare*, RS 438.4.2

<sup>14</sup> Isaiah 35.8

<sup>15</sup> I Corinthians 3.16f

mending, or healing anything. Let people of faith witness to the better way. <sup>16</sup> Is that not why Jesus gave the new commandment? <sup>17</sup> Loving one another as he has loved us doesn't *replace* the other laws, be they biblical precepts or the agreements of contemporary governments. Rather the law of love is the one that crowns all the others, and ensures that all those commandments they're life giving. As Paul put it to Timothy: 'the law is good, if we use it legitimately.'<sup>18</sup>

In Lent, as we examine our lives and the way we are fulfilling the law – all that the law offers and asks – we are invited to renew our commitment to their life-giving requirements, even as we look to the cross and the empty tomb as the fulfilment of God's life-giving commitment to us and to all creation. Let it be so.

N. P. Uden

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<sup>16</sup> I Corinthians 12.31

<sup>17</sup> John 13.34

<sup>18</sup> I Timothy 1.8