



ORDINARY 27A

A complete Sunday service ready to use
for worship and inspire ideas in your church



Order of Service

Call to worship

Hymn:

19 STF – Be still and know that I am God OR

3 STF – Eternal God, your love's tremendous glory

Opening Prayers

The Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk

Hymn:

152 STF – This is the day, this is the day OR

107 STF – I sing the almighty power of God

Readings: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

Hymn:

255 STF – The Kingdom of God is justice and joy OR

277 STF – My song is love unknown

Reflections on the readings

Hymn:

287 STF – When I survey the wondrous cross OR

677 STF – Christ is made the sure foundation

Intercessions

Offering / collection

Blessing the offering

Hymn:

545 STF – Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart OR

345 STF – And can it be that I should gain

Blessing

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Call to worship

Open my eyes to see you, O God,
Open my heart to feel you close, O Spirit,
Open my hands to do your work, O Christ,
And open each of us up to receive your grace, we pray

Amen.¹

Hymn:

19 STF – Be still and know that I am God OR

3 STF – Eternal God, your love's tremendous glory

Opening Prayers

O Lord, our God,
In these trying times of heartache and suffering, when despair tempts us and sin draws us away from you, let us grow ever closer to you.

In giving us your Ten Commandments, you spoke directly to your people, revealing your holy will and calling us into covenant with you. We offer and commit our lives to you as the highest authority, O God.

As Paul did, may we count all else as loss compared with the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Your laws are not merely for our human benefit, but serve as your divine instruction. In following your commandments, may we experience the spiritual renewal that comes through walking faithfully with you.

Forgive us when we fail to honour you. Renew us by your Spirit and encourage us to walk faithfully in your ways until we reach the fullness of life in Jesus Christ.

With faithful hearts, may faithful actions follow. May your perfect law revive our souls and lead us in the path of righteousness.

Lord, help us to place you above all else, to treasure your word, and to pursue Christ with wholehearted faith, bearing the fruits of lives worthy of the kingdom you have entrusted to us.

May your word, now and forever, transform our hearts.

The true and greatest treasure in this life is knowing you, O God

Amen.²

We say together the Lord's Prayer

¹ Call to worship written by Tim Baker

² Opening prayers written by Alice Arbon

All Age Talk

Today I would like a couple of volunteers to play a game of Keepy Uppy, this is game where you have to keep a balloon from touching the ground.

*(You can either see who can keep it off the ground the longest **OR** measure fewest touches in a certain time, it is IMPORTANT not to give any further directions, and then begin by batting them the balloon).*

Make note of their score.

Right, I think it's only fair that I also have a go...now stand back:

(instead of batting the balloon yourself simply tape it to a chair, or place it in a bag/tape it to a wall, whatever you feel best suits the church).

There we go, I win *(least touches or longest time off the floor)*

Now do you think what I did was fair? It wasn't was it?

You see having some rules can be helpful, could you imagine a game of football without any rules – it may look more like rugby or American football, just barging past each other, *(you could even reference a Bluey episode called Shadowlands where Bluey and her friends explore the idea of playing a game without rules).*

A little later on we shall looking at some special rules that God gave to his people to respect each other and to respect God.

Amen.³

Hymn:

152 STF – This is the day, this is the day OR

107 STF – I sing the almighty power of God

Readings: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

Hymn:

255 STF – The Kingdom of God is justice and joy OR

277 STF – My song is love unknown

Reflections on the readings

I'm about to begin our time of reflection by asking you all a question, but before I do, I want to assure you that I'm not expecting you to answer – not aloud anyway... 'Have you ever broken the law?' I wonder what each of us is thinking now... and, as I have said, that's between you and God, we're not about to have public confessions.

³ All Age Talk written by Mark Stennett

All societies have laws of some sort and in most societies – as in ours – there is an expectation that most people will keep those laws most of the time. That is the ‘norm’ with law-breaking being the exception (although the proliferation of crime fiction books and drama series on TV might lead us to suppose that, in fact, it is abiding by the law which is the exception!)

If we were to examine the laws of our own land carefully, we would probably agree that most of them are appropriate and just, although there may well be disagreement between us about some points. These grey areas are the focus of a great deal of time in our government and legislation is constantly being rewritten, updated and refined – that has to be the case as society takes note of new developments and behaviours and seeks to regularise them. So the law of the land is constantly changing – it is not, we might say, written in stone.

That, of course, takes us to the Ten Commandments, which form one of today’s appointed bible passages, from Exodus chapter 20. For the people of Israel, having escaped from slavery in Egypt and being formed into a nation during their wilderness wanderings, the law was written in stone, by the very finger of God, and presented to them by Moses. These ten laws have formed the basis of many systems of law ever since, particularly the second five which deal with moral and social subjects – murder, adultery, theft, lying and coveting. The first five deal with matters which may be regarded more as religious in nature – the recognition of God, idolatry, taking God’s name in vain, honouring the sabbath day and attitudes to parents – and are not so often enshrined in civil law today.

What is interesting in all the four bible passages suggested for today, is not so much the laws they propound as the attitude to those laws and the ways in which keeping – or breaking – laws can affect individuals and society. After Moses has presented the Israelites with the Ten Commandments (which were accompanied by thunder and lightning, smoke on the mountain and trumpet blasts) we hear that they were afraid and trembled. In fear of death they begged Moses not to let God speak to them directly. Moses responded by telling them not to be afraid, the dramatic phenomena which had accompanied the law-giving were, he said, because God had come to test them ‘and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin’.

So an early, basic, response to the revelation of the law is seen as fear – and the suggestion is that the fear may be a healthy thing, preventing the people from sinning.

The second reading comes from the book of Psalms – a collection of writings and songs which are thought to date largely from the period when Israel was a settled nation, living under the rule of David and other kings, so around 1000BCE, several hundred years after the time of Moses. In Psalm 19, possibly written by David himself, after a beautiful hymn of praise to the way in which creation speaks of God, we find a rather different attitude to the law has developed. In verses 7-10 the law is described as perfect, sure, right, clear, pure, true and righteous and its effect on people is painted in extravagant terms, as something which ‘revives the soul, makes wise the simple, rejoices the heart, enlightens the eyes’. The law is, the psalmist claims, more desirable than ‘much fine gold’ and ‘sweeter than honey’ and the hearer is enjoined to keep the law for in doing so ‘there is great reward’.

It’s an interesting progression from the thunder and fear of Exodus, to move to the honey, gold and reward of the Psalms. It’s also an important progression, which might be mirrored in the way our own society has represented God and God’s law over recent centuries. At one time, fear was a prevailing emotion in church teaching and preaching. Gradually that element has been softened and more emphasis has been placed on love and well-being. That might be something you would like to talk about further after the service.

Our third bible passage takes us into the letters of St Paul to the early church. Here he is writing to the Philippians, a young church for whom he shows a particular affection in his letter and to whom he opens his own soul and shares his experience. He is writing here about his credentials as a leading Jew. It may sound boastful to our ears, but the point is that he is demonstrating to these young Christians that he knows what he is speaking about. He relates his own exemplary status within the Jewish faith, claiming that he was 'blameless' in respect of the law – a weighty claim, given the way in which the Jewish law had expanded and grown since the time of Moses. So Paul has been a devout and faultless law-keeper in his Jewish past – no-one can suggest otherwise.

'Yet' (always an important word!), 'Yet', he says, he regards all that as worthless compared with his more recent experience of Christ. His words here are much stronger than the English translations suggest. The Greek word he uses which is normally translated as 'rubbish' is really a word for excrement. Paul really wants his readers to hear what he is saying! So let's make sure we do understand:

Paul tells the Philippians that, according to the Jewish law, he was blameless. Everything which could humanly be done to obey and follow God, Paul had done. However, instead of wanting to be congratulated for this, he now sees it all as 'rubbish', as 'loss' in comparison with the value of knowing Christ. Paul is urging the early church not to get trapped in an approach to faith which makes it into a list of rules and regulations, a tick box exercise, a competition in holiness, but to recognise that the transformative gift of God in Christ shapes the believer in a totally different way – holiness is not obtained by human efforts to keep laws and regulations, but by a knowledge of Christ as Lord. Nothing else matters, says Paul. It is through Christ and only through Christ that the believer can obtain true righteousness – which comes from God, not from oneself.

It is interesting that Paul then goes on to say he has not obtained this already. Paul, who was willing to say that he was blameless with regard to the law, knows that the righteousness which comes from Jesus is not a cheap and easy gain, but the product of a lifetime's striving and pressing on. The early church had to learn that following Christ was a different sort of life of faith from that which some of them had known and experienced within Judaism.

It is against this sort of tension that Jesus tells the parable of the tenants in the vineyard. He seems to be using this dramatic story of inheritance and violence to warn the Jewish authorities about their approach to life – that is certainly how they understand it as Matthew tells us at the end.

Let's try and hear the story as they might have heard it. It's a story about a vineyard; in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, the vineyard was often used as a symbol for Israel so the hearers would assume that was what was meant here. In that case, the landowner, the owner of the vineyard, would be God. God is described as having taken care over the vineyard, and then leased it to tenants whilst travelling abroad. We imagine that the Jews listening would have seen themselves as the tenants, taking care of God's precious vineyard through their observance and promotion of the law of Moses.

With the next scene, the story becomes rather more disturbing for them – for the owner sends slaves to collect the fruit, who are beaten, killed and stoned by the tenants. What is Jesus getting at here? Later in Matthew (23:37) Jesus accuses the Jewish leaders as having 'murdered the prophets and stoned the messengers' who were sent to them, so they probably have an uncomfortable realisation that they are being 'got at' here. Finally, Jesus tells them, the owner decides to send his son, hoping that the tenants will respect him; on the contrary, however, they think that by murdering the son and heir they will inherit the vineyard instead. The story is becoming very pointed and poignant now but

they realise that the tenants have made a big mistake – killing the son will not lead to them inheriting, far from it, it will lead to their destruction as well. A nasty moment for them – one probably intended to give them the chance to realise what they are doing and look again at Jesus and who he was. But sadly, they miss the opportunity and continue in their campaign to get rid of Jesus.

Reading the parable in that way makes it all too easy for us today to demonise the responses of others and congratulate ourselves on not being the target, but is that really a good use of Scripture? Isn't the fact that this story is included in our readings today an indication that we too have something to learn from it?

Are we too, at times, tenants like those in the story? Are we ever guilty of hiding behind church tradition or practice to evade facing up to who Jesus is? Do we sometimes cling to our own rights and privileges, rather than recognise that the vineyard/the church belongs to God, not to us? Do we, like those tenants, fail to offer back to God the fruit for which God looks?

Jesus finishes the parable with some words of warning to his hearers – 'Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.' It is our calling and privilege to produce those fruits.

Some questions for reflection:

1. How do you feel about law-keeping/law-breaking in our current society?
2. 'At one time, fear was a prevailing emotion in church teaching and preaching. Gradually that element has been softened and more emphasis has been placed on love and well-being.' Do you agree? What has been your experience?
3. Are there achievements/credentials in your own life which you would now consider to be 'rubbish' compared with the experience of knowing Christ?
4. Can you identify with Paul when he writes: 'forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus'?
5. How would you place yourself in the parable Jesus told in Matthew 21:33-46?

What are the 'fruits of the kingdom'?

Amen.⁴

Hymn:

287 STF – When I survey the wondrous cross OR

677 STF – Christ is made the sure foundation

Prayers of intercession

Perfect God, we come to you in prayer, conscious of our imperfections and of the way in which your world has been spoiled. We thank you that you have said that you hear us when we pray and so, in faith and trust,

- We pray for all who live today in fear... fear of violence or punishment..., fear of starvation or need..., fear of dependency and helplessness... We call to mind situations amongst those we know and around the world where fear distorts the truth and erodes hope...

⁴ Reflection written by Jill Baker

To all who live in fear, give courage today.

- We pray for all who hold positions of authority... all who seek to lead others without seeing clearly themselves..., all who make laws or statutes based on self-interest, not the good of all..., all who hold power without responsibility or authority without compassion...

To all who lead and guide, give wisdom today.

- We pray for the nations of the world... holding in mind the stories we have seen and heard this week..., praying for those affected by disaster..., those affected by war..., those affected by an unequal sharing of resources..., those affected by corruption, exploitation and discrimination...

To the nations of the world, give justice today.

- We pray for the church around the world... holding in prayer churches who are persecuted for faith in Christ..., churches who are struggling to keep going because of small numbers..., churches who lack the human or financial resources to continue their mission.... We pray for church leaders, lay and ordained, and all who have to make decisions about buildings, money, personnel, priorities...

To your church throughout the world, give renewal today.

- We pray for all who are in pain today... pain in body, remembering all in hospital, hospice and care home..., pain in mind, remembering all who struggle with depression or poor mental health and all experiencing suicidal thoughts..., pain in spirit, remembering all for whom faith is bitter, difficult, or impossible to hold onto...

To all who live with pain, give healing today.

- We pray for those affected by death and bereavement... for those known to us who are facing death at this time..., for all who live daily with loss and bereavement..., for all who care for and minister to the dying and the bereaved...

To all affected by death, give peace today.

We ask all our prayers in the name of Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God,

Amen.⁵

We will now take up the offering.

So thank we all our God, for all that we have received.

Come, by your grace, we pray, and bless these gifts,

And all of us,

So that our resources, our time, our energy and our lives might be used to see you mission fulfilled here on earth.

Come, Lord Jesus, we pray,

Amen.⁶

⁵ Prayers of intercession written by Jill Baker

⁶ Additional prayers by Tim Baker

Hymn:

545 STF – Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart OR

345 STF – And can it be that I should gain

Blessing

May you go out into a world seeking renewal, and listen for the life-giving Spirit of God.

May you go out into a world craving justice and discover the inclusive Christ everywhere.

May you go out into a world looking for love, and share the unconditional love of the Creator with all whom you meet.

Go in peace,

Amen.⁷

⁷ Additional prayers by Tim Baker