

Exodus 20:3-11, Matthew 22:34-40

Today we're looking at the first table of the Decalogue – the commandments that deal with our relationship with God. The Ten Commandments have been given as a result of the relationship God established with his people and so to begin with he reminds us that it's the relationship that is crucial and how to go about our daily living in order to maintain it and nurture it.

The first few verses we read today tell us: you shall have no other gods; you shall not make an image for yourself and bow down or worship it as I am a jealous God. When we think about this, we think that it's got nothing to say to us today as we are not idolaters – we do believe in one God and worship him alone. There are pagans among us here in Orkney but they are a tiny minority and they have nothing to do with us or our beliefs.

I wonder though whether our idols – things we worship instead of God – are different than the wooden or carved images of old. Are we not in danger of worshipping money, beauty, youth, fitness, busyness, productivity, technology or opportunities instead? Are we not likely to worship family time, leisure or even church instead? Are these not the things that can stand in our way of worshipping God sometimes?

How about us as a church? Do we not worship our buildings, our ministries, our position, or our traditions instead of God himself? It would be easy to disregard that by saying we worship God by worshipping our buildings, ministries, positions and traditions.

Today I want to say that we need some proper soul searching in the church. The Church of Scotland just embarked on such a journey with a jerk. The Council of Assembly brought to the General Assembly this year a strategic plan for the next 10 years. It stated: 'The context in which we offer ministry is changing and consequently the shape and forms of ministry are changing. With fewer full-time parish ministers available, new and challenging opportunities are opening up for team ministry. This requires flexibility and imagination.'<sup>1</sup>

Here are a number of things suggested in the plan: 'By 2020, the Council of Assembly, in cooperation with Presbyteries and other Councils, will develop criteria to enable identification of appropriate places for new and emerging congregations; for growing congregations; for situations where the goal is ongoing sustainability; and where congregations have no long term future.

By 2020, the General Trustees and Council of Assembly will have in place an integrated strategy for the appropriate development and disposal of buildings, leading to the optimum number of sustainable, better-equipped and affordable places for future mission.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gapublications.co.uk/storage/publications/cos-strategic-plan-2018-2028pdf.pdf>, p. 14.

By 2021, governance structures will be streamlined to enable effective implementation while maintaining compliance with charity regulations.’<sup>2</sup>

So basically team ministries with less reliance upon full-time ministers and increased reliance on people in the pews exercising their ministry, less buildings and less congregations. Investing in growing congregations and closing down the ones that are dying. Streamlined structures so that we can focus on mission.

In fact this is being implemented in Shetland as we speak. They’re ceasing to be a Presbytery with separate charges and instead are becoming one charge with one parish minister and 5 buildings instead of 33. There will be a team in operation there to work alongside the minister.

Personally I thought the strategic plan wasn’t specific enough but it made the right noises. I thought the General Assembly will accept that and still nothing will happen until the last one turns off the lights. Do you know what happened two weeks ago in Edinburgh? The General Assembly rejected this strategic plan 439 votes to 130. Instead they voted for the ‘counter-motion calling for “a radical action plan for 2019-2022 to achieve much-needed reform within our church.”’<sup>3</sup>

People said – we don’t have 10 years, bring us something far more radical than that. We need to change now.

With that came several other instructions, including the following: ‘Instruct Presbyteries to create robust, imaginative and courageous Presbytery Plans, to reduce the number of charges, create ministry hubs, enable new pioneer and new church planting opportunities, and new reformed pathways into ministry

Instruct Kirk Sessions to work with Presbyteries to reflect on the state of decline of the national Church and in particular how that affects the Church locally and determine what their vision and mission is for the next three years.’<sup>4</sup>

This is the boldest, most monumental, radical and Spirit-led decision the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland has taken in years.

### **Hymn MP3 – Abba Father**

Sabbath is meant to keep us attuned to God – keep us in touch with this vital relationship that trumps all others, that keeps us grounded, guided and rooted in our Creator who does know what we need better than we do ourselves. If we do that right – with all our soul

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>3</sup>

[http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/news\\_and\\_events/news/2018/general\\_assembly\\_calls\\_for\\_more\\_radical\\_strategic\\_plan](http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/news_and_events/news/2018/general_assembly_calls_for_more_radical_strategic_plan).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

and heart and mind – everything else falls into place too, our life is in balance, we let God lead us through the challenges life throws at us.

Sabbath is more than just a day in the week though – it's a way of life. A way of life where God is at the centre, where he is truly worshipped and honoured. The Israelites were told that every seven years all debts had to be cancelled and slaves walked free. Every seven times seven years all land returned to their rightful owners. It was God's law with the good of the community at heart – no zero hours contracts keeping us trapped, no mounting debts leading to depression and suicide, no poverty so deep it leads to despair and chokes life out of its victims. God at the centre means everybody wins and everybody thrives.

If we let go of our greed, power or need of ever increasing profit, God works in us and around us and sets things right. What could that mean for us, his tired and fearful church? Is it possible that if we give up on our need to constantly do things and be busy and spend time in God's holy presence and simply be with him instead, God will show us the way? Is it possible that we will see and appreciate how powerfully God is on the move in our day and follow where he leads? It's worth a try anyway so let's start now with a moment of silence as we bask in God's guiding presence. Amen.