

Holiness and justice

Readings: Ex 20:1 – 17, John 2:13 – 22

Holiness and justice are lofty words aren't they? What comes to mind when you hear those words?

Religious words that are meaningless today?

Something high and unattainable?

A holier than thou type person?

Let's pray. Loving God, we have our own ideas about these things. Rid us of our preconceptions and limited thinking. Show us what you want us to understand and what you want us to do. Amen

On 27th July of 1940 Chiune Sugihara was getting ready to leave Kaunas in Lithuania because he thought his work as ambassador for Japan was over. He got the shock of his life as he looked out his window that morning. Over 200 people were desperately trying to gain access to his house. They were only kept at bay by the security guard.

Neither he nor his wife Yukiko had any idea who these men, women and children were or why they were trying to climb over his fence.

He asked for a delegation of five representatives and discovered the people were Jewish refugees from Lithuania and Poland. They urgently needed transit visas to Japan so they could escape the Nazis.

Sugihara had worked hard to get where he was. He had grown up in a middle class family, studied hard and found faith in Christ at university. His family had wanted him to be a doctor but Sempo, as Westerners called him, was always interested in politics and diplomatic relations.

Over time he progressed up the ranks to become Vice-Consul for Japan in 1939. At that time Lithuania was a sovereign state but the Soviet Union occupied much of the country in 1940. Jews found themselves in great danger.

Sempo's response to their need was to ask his government what to do. He was given the official criteria – most of which the desperate Jews did not meet. And the Nazis were coming in from the East.

If Sugihara issued the visas, he could be fired and disgraced; if he didn't, the Jews would die. Sugihara told his wife, "I may have to disobey my government, but if I do not, I will be disobeying God. I know I should follow my conscience."

Yukiko agreed with him, and they both went to work writing out visas. (From Japan, they were able to go to a couple of Dutch colonies which required no visas.)

As the danger increased, more and more Jews turned up. Yukiko and Chiune hardly slept or ate for the next four weeks as they frantically issued visas. Finally the Russians insisted the consulate close. Early in September the Sugihara family

prepared to leave. They stayed in a hotel overnight before boarding a train for Berlin.

The Jews found them in the hotel so more visas were written. Even as they boarded the train Chiune and Yukiko were anxiously writing more visas. As the train pulled away a few visas flew from the window onto the tracks, snatched up by desperate Jews.

Figures vary but the Simon Wiesenthal Centre has estimated that Chiune Sugihara issued transit visas for about 6,000 Jews and that around 40,000 descendants of the Jewish refugees are alive today because of his actions.

All because Sempo served a holy God whose heart was for justice for all people.¹

Often we do think of holiness and justice as other-worldly qualities. But they are not qualities at all; rather they are actions.

Holiness and justice are actions demonstrated first of all by our loving God. God called the chosen people to live holy lives and to carry out life-giving actions to others. This was what would make them a light to the nations. It was this God displaying God's holiness and justice in Jesus' actions and teachings in the New Testament. It is the same God who enables us to be holy people living out together his ways of justice.

You may well be thinking that we don't do that as we could/should. Perhaps that is true; never-the-less as Christ followers, the Bible tells us to be holy as he is holy² the Lord never tells us to live in a way that is impossible. We can walk together as a holy people who live out justice in our daily lives, always honouring God's Spirit within us.

The challenge for us is that we endeavour to do this in solitary ways. The ten commandments were not issued to Moses to carry out on his own. They were not issued for him and his family to obey. They were issued for the covenanted people of Israel to live out in community as God's joint people.

Recently I read an author I respect deeply who said he would much rather focus on the beatitudes than the commandments at this stage of his life. What do you think of that statement?

The Ten Commandments or words are a focus of the Torah³, the first five books in the Bible and actually of the whole First (Old) Testament. Perhaps they were even

¹ Sources for this story: www.pbs.org/wgbh/sugihara/readings/excerpt.html, www.colsoncenter.org/the-center/columns/call-response/19313-christians-who-changed-their-world, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chiune_Sugihara

² 1 Peter 1:16

³ Generally the five books of Moses - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. But the word "torah" can also be used to refer to the entire Jewish Bible (the body of scripture known to non-

the starting point for the writing down of those first five books. These commandments occur twice in the First Testament.

Where is the second place they are recorded?

In Deuteronomy 5:6 – 21 the explanations of the basic commands differ slightly but the commandments themselves are the same. The suggestion is that the commandments predate the rest of the law.

Some call them the 10 words because they were words which God actually spoke. And what the Lord spoke was the ways to live out God's very nature in daily life. It is possible that the people wrote these words in very succinct form on tablets so small they could be carried in the palm of a hand; perhaps like we wear a cross today. That way they'd remember how they should live.

The words begin with Verse 2

I am the Lord your God, who rescued you from Egypt.

It is Yahweh, the great I AM, who is speaking to his people. Earlier you will recall, God telling the Moses, 'I am that I am.'⁴

The first word is that this God, must be pre-eminent. This God is the one we worship, the God of the Jews, later revealed in Jesus Christ. This is our God. We are this God's people. This God knows what is best for all people and has a plan to restore and reconcile all things to him in Christ.

I'm not going to go through the commandments in detail. The essential thing for us to note is that these words from God are a self-revelation. They are not rules to narrow our lives but rather a revelation from God showing us how to live fully in relationship with God and others.

The first commandment actually sums them all up:

You must not have any other god but me.

Some claim that God is vain, insecure, selfish, wanting all the praise and glory for himself. Actually God knows what is good for us. Worshipping anyone or anything else, placing anything else at the centre of our world, leads to a diminished existence. If we choose any other god, our lives will be smaller and poorer than they will be if we worship God alone.

So what might some of the gods be that we are tempted to place before the God of the universe?

- Material wealth / things
- Personal happiness
- Independence

Jews as the Old Testament and to Jews as the Tanakh or Written Torah), or in its broadest sense, to the whole body of Jewish law and teachings.

⁴ Exodus 3:14

- Our reputation
- Self-fulfilment

I watched a tiny part of a movie recently. In it a disillusioned Nun said she used God instead of trying to find herself. That made me mad. Why does the Media portray our God this way? We are not obliterated as humans when we follow God. Actually a relationship with God is the only way to truly find who we are and to discover who we are becoming. Btw the movie was called Hummingbirds – in the US it was released under the title Redemption.

Back to the commandments –God gave them after God’s had rescued miraculously the people from Egypt. God wants them to have a new start - not a set of rules, but a new and holy relationship with him. From this relationship will flow lives of justice.

Today it seems we avoid relationships with others. We are afraid we will intrude or we will be hurt. Actually we will – guaranteed. If we enter relationship with God or others we will be hurt. Jesus knew this and entered our world anyway.

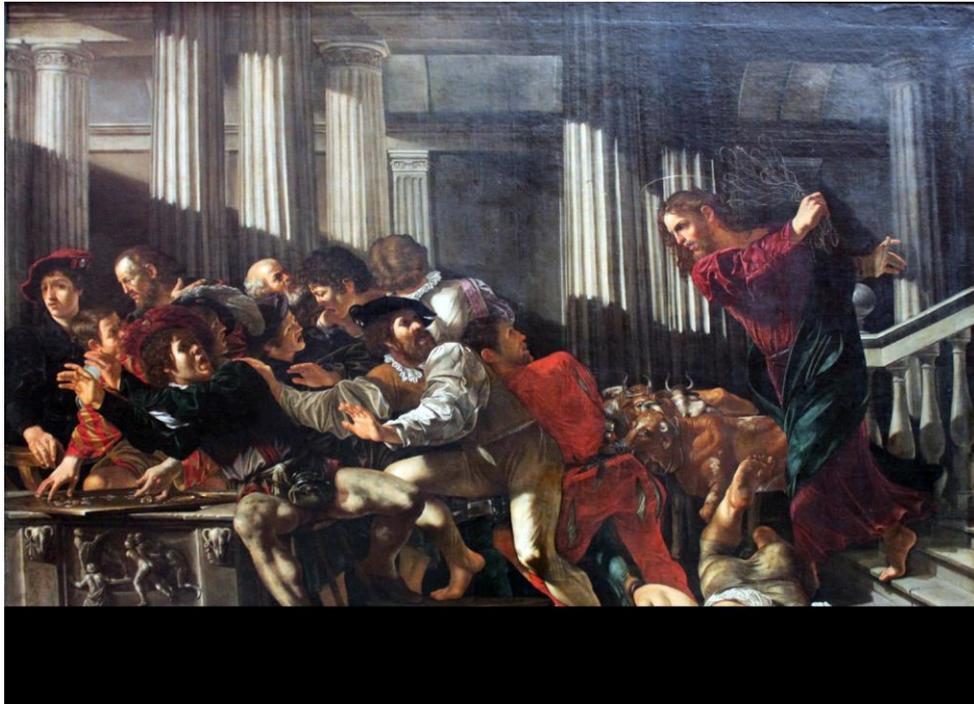
Our gospel incident occurred when Jesus enters the place where God is meant to be central, the temple, and sees instead of a worshipful space, a market place.

In the original language Jesus’ words are “You have made my Father’s house into a house of trade.” Matthew’s version has Jesus saying “This is a place of worship, not a hiding place for robbers.” Now I can’t imagine that Jesus is saying these words in neutral tones.

Jesus is holy and Jesus wants justice. Jesus isn’t finding either in this place where both should be plain to see. Jesus is absolutely furious. Jesus causes a major incident which involves his disciples and everyone who was there. Holiness and justice are not individual pursuits but joint actions.

Next the leaders ask Jesus for a miracle. But Jesus doesn’t give them the answer they want or can even understand at that point. Alison Morgan says “Jesus sought not to answer questions but to explode assumptions.”⁵

⁵ Alison Morgan, *The Wild Gospel*, 225



Notice in the painting, the ones being thrown out are in the dress of Caravaggio's day. The artist was making a statement that Jesus could easily come, in his day, and repeat the incident. The same could be said of today too. Perhaps Jesus would throw us or our peers out of the temple too.

But it's not good for us simply to try harder. If we want to be holy we will have to follow Jesus. We can't make ourselves holy no matter how much self-discipline we apply.

And we need to remind ourselves that being holy isn't about obeying rules – the rules are merely pointers to Jesus; to God. Following Jesus is costly and many of us are not prepared to pay the cost – not really. It would be alright if we could follow Jesus as a solitary pursuit but seriously, we can't. Lone Christians only ever get part of the picture. Living in relationship with Jesus, means living in relationship with others. We can't avoid it.

I said earlier that holiness and justice are not characteristics but actions. Of course that isn't strictly true – they are characteristics but they are only visible in action. And the actions can only be carried out in community.

I would like to suggest that for us westerners, the way we so often put other gods before our God, is to focus on ourselves as individuals. We pursue our own goals in life, whether they are spiritual goals or material ones. We are afraid of community. One of the ways this shows up is in the way we put so many activities ahead of our combined worship. Or we hold back from joining a small group. Our culture is very individualistic and we absorb that without even realising it.

Newsman Peter Arnett told a story of being in Israel in a small town on the West Bank, when there was a sudden explosion. Bodies were thrown through the air – death and destruction everywhere; agonised screams rending the air.

A man rushed up to Peter with a wee girl in his arms. “Mister, I need you to take us to hospital. The Israeli troops have sealed the area and I can’t get out. But you can; you’re the Press. She’ll die if we stay here. Please, please help me.”

With the man and injured girl, Peter managed to get through the sealed area to the hospital in Jerusalem. All the way the man in the back seat was pleading “Please hurry. I’m losing her. I’m losing her.”

When they finally got there, the girl was rushed to theatre. The two men sat in silence in the waiting room, too exhausted to even talk.

After a short while the doctor came out and solemnly told them the wee girl had died.

The man collapsed in tears. Peter hugged him and tried to bring some kind of comfort. “I don’t know what to say. I’ve never lost a child.”

The man looked at Peter strangely. “Oh Mister! That Palestinian girl was not my daughter. I’m an Israeli settler. She wasn’t my child. But Mister, There comes a time when each of us must realise that every child, regardless of their background, is a daughter or a son. There must come a time when we realise that we are all family.”⁶

Chiune and Yukiko Sugihara could do what was right during the war, because they had a relationship with the living God. Certainly they would have made lots of small decisions to act justly before that point in time.

I don’t know whether that Jewish man was a Christian or not. Regardless he understood something of the holiness of God and of God’s desire for justice for all people. Oh that we all had that understanding and lived as if it were true.

We began by thinking of holiness and how distant it can seem from who we are and how we act. And yet, this doesn’t need to be the case.

As Christians we need to be counter-cultural, not worshipping the gods of this age but serving the one true and holy God. That worship, if it is genuine, will result in our own transformed life.

Most often we ourselves are not aware that transformation is happening. We can’t see ourselves as others see us. But if we put God first, if we have a relationship with Jesus, God will make us holier bit by bit and that enables us to participate in actions that bring about justice in the lives of others too.

Let’s take a moment to have a wee chat with God:

1. What has God been saying to you/us about holiness and justice?
2. What does God want you/us to do about it?

⁶ The story is relayed by Tony Campolo in Let me tell you a Story. 120,121

Wait for God to speak

Whatever it is that God has said, we mustn't put it off. We need to Just do it, whatever the personal cost is for you. Following Jesus Christ is not for the faint-hearted.