

Sermon 3rd July 2022

Adultery

2 Samuel 11 v 1-27; John 8 v 1-11

Good morning, we come to the 7th commandment in our series of looking at the ten commandments through the prism of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

Now the 7th is a tricky one, because our society seems to have a particular fixation on sexual scandal in a prurient sort of way. This morning our subject is Adultery.

Before we get into the meaning of our two very contrasting readings from the Old and New Testaments, we should revisit precisely what the seventh commandment says and what the Jewish Law dictates concerning punishment for Adultery.

Immediately after the commandment '**You shall not murder**' comes the 7th commandment in Exodus 20 v 14 – it's very short , just 5 words in English '**You shall not commit adultery**'.

It's not right to rank the commandments in numerical order of importance, but it's right up there before we get into mentioning stealing, lying and coveting. There are no ifs or buts or conditions - just the straight statement – You shall not commit adultery.

Neither should we forget that God gave very specific instructions to Moses as to the punishments for sin, for contradicting these commandments. Recorded in Leviticus, that book on the specific rules and laws of Holy Living for the Jewish people, it is stated very clearly in chapter 20 v10 that

If a man commits adultery with another man's wife, with the wife of his neighbour, both the adulterer and adulteress must be put to death.

So as we come to our first reading about David and Bathsheba we must realise this is a story about King David, the very person consecrated as 'King' by God to uphold God's laws for the people of Israel.

This story is a very human story; it's often said that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely - and let's face it, most of us have no great expectations that our politicians and others in authority are going to live perfect personal lives – but there are limits aren't there – well perhaps not!

This is a story about when power goes to the head of those in authority and they start to think they are above the rules set for everyone; sound familiar – because it's a constant trait throughout history into the present.

The scene is set in the very first verse of the reading, that curious almost benign and casual introduction:

In the spring, at the time when Kings go to war....but David remained in Jerusalem (gosh parallels with Ukraine!)

The main point is that in those days, Kings were supposed personally to lead their armies into battle. That was their job. But here we have David indolently getting out of bed in the early afternoon for a relaxing cooling stroll on the roof, whilst his armies are fighting a bitter battle against the enemy. Even worse, he thinks himself above everyone else and he can

safely and indulgently commit adultery with the wife of one of his soldiers away from home in that battle. As the consequences of that adultery surface, he then compounds his moral corruption as a leader by dishonestly entering into a cover-up exercise. Trying to trick Uriah into thinking the child to be born is his and eventually using his power to get his General, Joab, to have Uriah killed and in the process others as well. A complete abuse of power that started with adultery and ended effectively in murder. This is a human story of wrongdoing and cover-up to protect status or reputation.

From being a model ruler, generally caring for the welfare of his soldiers and people, this story marks his descent into something of a despot.

V 27 But the thing David had done displeased the Lord. - I bet it did!

In the following chapters in Samuel and Chronicles we read of the tragic consequences of David's disgraceful actions, the death of the child, the rape of his wives, the revolt by Absalom and more besides but also of his repentance spurred on by the Prophet Nathan, his heartfelt lament we were reminded of last Sunday afternoon, in Psalm 51, and his true commitment to Bathsheba who was the mother of another son, Solomon, who was later to be anointed King after David.

For those caught up in the anguish of making big mistakes, even the Old testament paints a picture that worthwhile life can continue afterwards – but not as it did before.

So David did not forfeit his life as per the law - and in the aftermath of this story we see his restoration as God's anointed King – but things are different and cannot be undone.

Which leads us to our New Testament reading, which gives us a remarkably clear view of the nature of God in relation to even the more calamitous of sins that we commit.

For this I've come prepared with my normal visual prop. This time a bag of stones to share with you

I have to admit whenever I read this account of Jesus and the Adulteress it rather brings to mind a scene from the now rather dated Monty Python film - The Life of Brian. Now of course, none us upstanding Christian folk should really be watching such a blasphemous film should we. I remember feeling uncomfortable but defiant whilst braving the wrath of the Christian protesters outside the cinema when it first came out.

In it a lady badly disguises herself as a man, with a false beard and clothes, so she can take part in the stoning - only men were allowed to do the stoning, so she was desperately trying to take part in the punishment which to her was more important than knowing what the person had done wrong to deserve it.

For Monty Python their observation on humankind was that secretly we love a bit of a scandal - and we love even more having a go at punishing or condemning the offender – to the point we get the wrongdoing and circumstances quite out of perspective sometimes. Indeed, people will queue up to join those condemning the wrongdoing as individuals and as part of a thirsty mob.

This angle is of course not totally true, and it's taken to its extreme by Monty Python in the expression of ironic humour, but certainly when we see the headlines in the press and media about celebrities, politicians and the royal family, there does seem to an element of

voyeurism about scandalous events – apparently the readers lap it up and it sells newspapers – but the truth must out, mustn’t it. It’s in the public interest..... And lives are pretty much destroyed because there’s no way back.

This desire for punishment might be based on righteous anger – but we should not think that as Christians we are immune from overdoing it. My worst ever experience when standing for parliament many years ago, was when I was honest enough to say I supported the right to abortion at a hustings when a pro Life group was present. Their vitriolic anger personally directed at me was the only time I have ever felt physically scared in politics. And they were Christians. I now see similar over the Atlantic.

But in the cause of the Pharisees’ true religion and law, the woman found in adultery is made to stand in front of the group in the middle of the Temple courtyard - where was the man we wonder - but then the Pharisees are only all men aren’t they. So they lay their trap for Jesus, The law says we should stone her to death – what do you, Jesus, say? In their binary world of no compassion, Jesus has the choice of either denying Jewish Law or disobeying Roman law that says Jews are no longer allowed to execute the death penalty. Only Roman law can do that – the tension of Religion beliefs versus Civil Powers is not a new phenomenon.

So Jesus bends down and starts writing on the no doubt dusty ground with his finger. What he writes we do not know, or perhaps he was just doodling; was he playing for thinking time on how to respond, was he hoping they would go away and he could dodge the question? But they insisted on him answering the question. Hell bent on trapping him whilst the woman suffered, put to waiting in front of them and the public – whilst potentially facing her death by stoning.

And what follows is one of the greatest statements that distinguishes the Kingdom of Christ from all that had gone before and indeed from any other religion. It should be the bedrock on how to behave when we fall into criticising and judging others as we all tend to do. How we react to wrongdoing and pursuit of retribution. This is a central rock of living our Christian faith.

If anyone of you is without sin, let him be first to throw a stone at her.

This is raw grace in abundance. This is not conditional love based on a person begging for forgiveness or the repentance and regret of the perpetrator as in King David’s case. This is unconditional love found by us in Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Note we are not being asked to condone or ignore the adultery or any other breaking of the commandments, either the ten from the Old Testament or the two that Jesus uses to sum up the law. We are being asked instead to examine HOW we respond when we might leap to confronting wrongdoing and expecting judgement or retribution. The lesson we learn in this reading is about Grace, even when things have gone badly wrong. Yes, things may have been wrong in the past, perhaps badly wrong, but grace is trust, hope, space and provision of love for a better present and future

At this, those who heard him began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there.

As he wrote again in the sand, Jesus gave each person time and space to consider their personal response - as an individual, not egged on by a crowd – to think what gave them a right to be so judgemental and dispense punishment in the name of God.

For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

What better example than this passage from John to us, which concludes to the adulteress... **Then neither do I condemn you, Jesus declared. Go now and leave your life of sin.**

There will be those of us here who in one way or another may have got things very wrong in our lives, be it in adultery, dishonesty, violence, abuse of power and position or whatever. Things may not be able to be undone, they are what they are. Churches may seem a difficult place to be in those circumstances. But churches and our fellowship should always be a place of hope and redemption, a place for encouragement and unconditional love, for re-finding the right ways together in Christ.

The message to all of us in these scriptures about adultery is to temper our leap to judgementalism, to our participating in the public exposé and punishment of the scandalous. But instead be sources and witnesses of Christ's grace and redemption to each other and the world about us. How else can I finish but...

May the grace of our lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all, now and for evermore. Amen.