

Talk for Easter 6, 9th May 2021

by Ian Totterdell, churchwarden

"It's the economy, stupid!" was a phrase that became widely known during Bill Clinton's successful campaign to become US President in 1992. It was originally directed at members of his campaign team, to remind them of a key message to take to voters: the US (and much of the western world) was in an economic recession, and if Bill was voted in to power then he would make things better. The team were not to be side-tracked by peripheral issues; sometimes you just need to be clear about the important things. Maybe the pandemic has made us think about what is important in our lives, in our society, in our world.

Our readings today contrast the simplicity of Jesus's commandments with those of the Jewish Law. Many of the Jews in Jesus's time, and particularly some of the Pharisees according to the accounts in the New Testament, placed a lot of emphasis on following the Law in great detail. Although we are familiar with the 10 commandments there is an established Jewish tradition that there are 613 commandments in the first five books of the bible (*Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy*; Jews call these the Torah). On that basis generations of rabbis had built a complex system of regulations (known as the Talmud), which the Jews were required to follow. People could be very troubled about whether what they were doing was what the Law, and so what God, demanded.

Contrast that complexity with what Jesus tells his friends: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you". What could be simpler? And John, in his letter, says that God's commands are not burdensome (which is not the same as being simple, of course). By living lives of love for our neighbours (and through them for God himself also) we demonstrate (to ourselves as well as to others) the faith and trust that we have in God to form us into the people that he wants us to be, fit for his Kingdom and worthy of being what he has already made us to be, friends of Jesus and children of God.

However, things that are simple in principle can still require our thought; it wouldn't be following Jesus's command in the best way if we were just to walk down the street giving £10 notes to everyone we passed, for example. In the gospels we see Jesus making a personal connection with each person that he heals, not just waving a hand over the multitudes from a hilltop. In the same way, we love others as Jesus loves us when we meet as people those we are helping, and give thought (and prayer) to how best we can do that. The process matters as well as the end result. (Of course, if Hospiscare, the Red Cross or other charities are asking for donations to fund their essential work it is impractical to expect to meet the people those charities are helping, but it's still good to respond as we are able.)

In the passage from Acts Peter, accompanied by some Jewish believers, has travelled to proclaim the good news about Jesus to Cornelius, a God-fearing Roman centurion, and his household. Such God-fearing Gentiles respected and prayed to God, but had not formally become Jews by undergoing circumcision; the views of orthodox Jews at the time about such people varied from respect and friendship to outright hostility. The Jewish believers with Peter seem to have assumed that Cornelius would have to become a Jew to become eligible for the forgiveness of sins that Jesus had won; and after that conversion Cornelius would be bound to follow the Jewish Law in all its detailed complexity. But to their astonishment, God has other priorities: on hearing Peter's words Cornelius and his household spontaneously put their faith in Jesus and immediately God pours out his Holy Spirit on them. No conversion to Judaism was required! Instead, just a simple baptism in the name of Jesus enabled the new Christians to formally demonstrate their new allegiance to Christ.

"God moves in mysterious ways" is a well-known saying. When God sent his Son to be born, live among us and die for us he did something totally new and unexpected (prophecies notwithstanding). Even Jesus's closest disciples, who had just spent 3 years living alongside him, found it hard at first to get past their expectations of the Messiah and embrace the new channels of God's grace, the incarnation and the sending of the Holy Spirit. We too can find it hard not to let the traditions and habits of our faith, which can give helpful structure and stability to our Christian lives, sometimes become barriers to how God wants to work in us and through us. Let us stay personally close to God, through prayer and through obeying Jesus's command, so that we can remain open to what he has planned; for it will make our joy complete!