

Sermon for 17th May, 2020 – Easter 6 – “If you love me”

Stay at home – stay alert – stay safe – it seems we are given new instructions on a weekly basis.

But these are not just idle requests or capricious commands whose only purpose is a test of obedience. There is a defined goal: Protect the NHS and Save Lives.

Thousands of fines have been handed out by the police to those who have felt that the law does not apply to them, but their crime is more than simply arrogance or selfishness: rules don't just make for a more ordered community – in some ways they help to define it. If you keep these rules, you belong to a society that seeks to care for others at the cost of individual freedom.

In my daily Bible readings for morning and evening prayer, I have been reading from Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, stories of a confused and frightened people having left behind old certainties and struggling in the wilderness towards a promised land and a new identity. The irony is not lost on me as their much maligned leader (Moses) seeks to guide them in the right direction while they seem to do all they can to undermine him to their collective detriment.

And while our church buildings are closed to public worship, we also have had to leave behind familiar rituals and practices that on the surface have defined who we are as children of God in this generation. If, as we proclaim, the Church is comprised of people rather than buildings, wherein will we find our new identity? How are we to be recognised as Christians if we are not simply “those who go to church on a Sunday”?

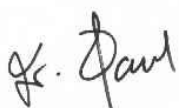
We are discovering afresh that our community is defined not just by where and when we meet, a sort of Sunday club for people with a concern for old buildings. It is defined by our attitudes and beliefs, and above all by the actions that proceed from them.

St Paul at the Areopagus cleverly used the altar to an unknown god to say that the image of the creator is best represented by the children of his creation rather than by images of silver and gold. He used their concern for proper religious conduct to introduce them to an understanding of God that was life-changing, life-defining, and lifelong.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments,” says Jesus to his followers as he promises to send the Spirit of Truth to be with them forever. “Love one another as I have loved you,” he told them at the Last Supper, and the message has not changed.

While there is indeed much about which we should be concerned as we travel together through the perils of the coronavirus pandemic, hanging onto the past is not a part of that. Let us in our prayers and hopes for the future look forward to discovering the Spirit of Truth among us, and journey towards our promised land of the Kingdom of God on earth.

Jesus' commandments are not simply a test of obedience for his followers, they define a community where love of God starts with love of neighbour, and where we live in hope of a new and better world in the glory of the Resurrection.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "St. Paul". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly stylized font.