

# Leavening Church

## Thought for Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> March (Louise Hampson)

Today we in the middle of Lent, traditionally a season of discipline and self-control or denial, a time of 'rules' and appropriately today's theme is all about (good) rules! This last year we have been more aware of rules than ever and the heated debates around which rules are right, who gets to choose and how we treat those who break them. One person's self-evidently good rule for the public good is someone else's infringement of liberty. Generally speaking, we are usually quite happy to follow the rules we agree with and kick against those we don't irrespective of their objective 'rightness'. Some rules are undoubtedly 'for our own good', however unpalatable they may be. It is human nature to try and 'interpret' the rules we don't want to follow, or find reasons why we feel they don't or shouldn't apply to us, but we are seldom the best judge of which are the right ones for us! For some people, following rules becomes a prison: people with OCD find themselves unable to function in life at all without following rules and routines of their own devising which may take up hours of their time or even cause them physical harm. So, what does all this have to do with our readings today? Well, in one we are given a sensible, practical set of rules by which a society can function for the common good, in the other we are shown the effect of the rule becoming the thing and not the effect it is intended to have.

In [Exodus 20](#) we are given the ten commandments, or should I say the Top Ten Commandments, as the Old Testament is full of myriad versions of these, with more added in other books and in Leviticus a list of requirements so long that by the time you get to the end you've forgotten the beginning! In these injunctions we are given a set of rules which make sense – don't murder, don't steal, respect your elders, don't lie etc etc, all things which would help ensure people could live harmoniously together secure in the knowledge that they had each other's welfare at heart, or at the very least were not actively plotting their downfall. One of these is, of course, keep the seventh day holy and don't do any work. In the more extreme ends of orthodox Judaism this is taken to mean you cannot even turn on a light or make a cup of tea, but the underlying principle is a very sound one: God rested on the seventh day and human beings need rest and refreshment in order to function. Spiritual refreshment is necessary for the body as the soul and if we don't stop regularly and allow ourselves to renew and recharge, we burn out mentally and physically and lose our sense of perspective.

In our second reading ([John 2: 13-22](#)), we see a situation where 'the rules' have become the thing, not the behaviour they are meant to guide. It is famously the rare example of Jesus being angry and his normally very calm behaviour, typically performing miracles and telling people to keep them quiet (!), becomes very antagonistic and public. He is enraged that the 'business' of the temple and multiple requirements of observance has taken over, obscuring the purpose of *being* in the temple and what the temple actually is. It is the house of God, but had become a place cluttered with the business of human interpretation of what being in the temple required of you, humans 'interpreting' the rules which they themselves had embellished and in seeking definition had created complexity. Like children endlessly asking the 'yes, but' questions in order to find the fine boundaries and know exactly what to do (or what they could not do). It had become about special coins, pigeons, doves, and not about being in the presence of God. Jesus did the same thing with the Commandments – he cut through the clutter, the endless 'yes, but' questions by which the religious authorities sought to trip him up and redefined the ten in two – "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your soul, and the second is like, namely this: love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the laws and the prophets". If we allow following the rules to become our *raison d'être* and lose sight of the purpose of them we are in trouble. So this Lent, let's follow the 'rules' we have set ourselves, but not enslave ourselves to them such that we lose sight of the reason for doing it, which is to clear the clutter of our lives and minds and refocus ourselves on God.