



grace at ten percent

When we take a collection in the church, about half-way through the service, we often remind you that, every pound you give to the church turns into £1.25 for the church when you give through the GiftAid scheme. Donating through GiftAid means that we, like all charities, can claim an extra 25p for every £1 you give. It doesn't cost you any extra: if you're a taxpayer, you simply use the white envelope in your pew. Think of it as an extra 25% worth of Good News, every time you give to the church.

Imagine for a moment, however, if that wasn't the case at all. If we said to you something else, when taking a collection, something like this:

In the interest of transparency, we need to tell you that for every £1 you give to this church, our helpful volunteers are going to help themselves to 25% for counting up your offerings and taking the cash deposits to the bank. 25% goes to them, but, it's okay, because most of it goes to the work of this church, and the many ways we serve people as a church.

You wouldn't be amused. And it wasn't good news for Jesus when, finally, he took matters into his own hands, and drove the money changers out of the temple. They were taking advantage of the people by charging high transaction fees for exchanging ordinary money for the temple coin they needed to use for their offering.

The Synoptic gospels, – Matthew, Luc, and Marc, – place this episode towards the end of Jesus' ministry, it is the final straw in Jesus' many run-ins with authority. The cleansing of the temple comes in the flow of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. And it's the

thing that finally gets him arrested. Leading to the events of Holy Week.

This must be an important episode in the life of Jesus: not only does it appear in all of the Gospels, but when it appears in John's Gospel, it comes not at the end, but at the very start of Jesus' ministry. We have in John the story of Jesus the subversive, overturning the money changers' tables, signalling an overturn of religion, and of the story of God people are used to hearing.

Jesus' anger is directed at priests that allows the exploitation of the faithful. As Jesus would say in Matthew: "Yes, the priests crush people with unbearable demands, but never lift a finger to ease their burden"? (Matthew 23:4)

This episode in the temple strikes a chord with the Lent series some of us have been following. The hypocrisy of the church wrecking people's lives is a running theme in the BBC drama Broken we have been watching on Sunday mornings. In the afternoon, after the worship service, we follow this up with a discussion and a time of prayer.

What strikes me about the series, Broken, is the depth with which it plumbs the experience of people in their ordinary, but often insurmountable struggles. For those of you who haven't seen it, Broken tells the story of a parish priest and the people of the community he ministers to. The series is set somewhere in the North, the weather is suitably grim, and the backgrounds clad in varying shades of blue-grey; occasionally, we might see a nicotine-stained magnolia interior; possibly inside a police station.

I think all of us are struck by how true to life the characters feel, how well the drama mirrors our lives, or the lives of people we know.

I've been trying to imagine what some of the characters we've met in the course of the drama would make of the Old Testament passage we have as our first reading today: the Ten Commandments. How would they read it? What would they see, and how would their standpoint, their condition, shape how they hear those words in the Bible?

We had in the first episode Christina, a barely employed single mum, who is sacked from her job in a betting shop, for stealing £60 from the till. She tells her manager it wasn't exactly stealing, because she'd left a handwritten IOU. She intended to pay the money back in a few days. Christina is sacked on the spot.

So let's take the text 'you shall not steal' as an example. I wonder if Christina would hear it as a luxury she just can't afford, not when she has no help from her ex-partner, no job, and three children to feed.

What about the woman who comes to the priest with a confession: she thinks it's time to call it lights out. She is intent on suicide. Her apparently her successful career and white-collar position have allowed her to hide a gambling habit. The habit has grown out of control. She has been embezzling from the company to cover her gambling debts. She's about to be found out. And she can't bear to be around to face the fall out, or to pay the cost to her reputation, or the £200,000 missing from the accounts. She sees only one way out.

Would she hear the commandments on the whole as irrelevant to the real problems that real people have to face. Does the very word "commandment" speak to her of a decree given by an impersonal ruler at an impossible distance? Or they in the end unattainable ideals, something you grow up with, until you

grow up and recognise that ideals have nothing to do with the broken world in which we live? Are they a list of do's and don'ts, obstacles the church puts before us? Are they a cruel but constant reminder of an out of touch and irrelevant church?

What about Father Michael. The stories in the series revolve around Michael, who became a priest despite not having much to thank the church for. He was abused as a boy, was left emotionally scarred, to say the least, and now, much later in life, begins to experience flashbacks to the troubled period in the midst of which he heard a calling to the priesthood. And his mind goes back constantly to the childhood abuse.

Despite all of that, Michael Kerrigan is a good, compassionate, and caring priest, somehow holding together a Christian community.

But we meet him at a point when he is asking himself 'has my life, has my decision to give my life to people in ministry made any difference? Has it made any difference to anyone at all? Have I made a difference? Or has my faith been irrelevant to the lives of the people around me? (Many people would say faith is irrelevant today.)

But the genius of the drama is that it leaves us, the viewers, to wonder what other people's lives would be like if Father Michael were not part of their story? Where would they be?

But what does Father Michael make of the commandments he teaches to the children he is preparing for communion? With his catechism lessons disrupted by memories of childhood abuse in the church, are these "commandments" for him the church's ultimate hypocrisy? Setting up rules they themselves are not willing to keep.

(We have a child being baptised today. Surely, 'thou shall make the world safe, and life abundant and wonder-filled for a child coming forward for baptism' ought to be self-

evidently at the top of the biblical commandments.)

I think in the end the characters in the fictional drama would probably take the Ten Commandments in the way that many of us were taught in Sunday School: as a bargaining tool, a bargaining tool we could use to earn God's grace.

Let me explain what I mean. But to do that, allow me to make a trivial cultural observation: Britain will do anything for a 10% discount! I'm referring – of course – to those loyalty cards we all have in our wallets: buy 10 cups of coffee, get the next one free. Or, buy nine of whatever, and the 10th one is on us. In the end, it amounts to nothing more than a 10% discount. (I have them myself...)

When we stop to reckon with our lives, to take a good look at ourselves, we know we fall short of the best that we intend for ourselves, let alone of what God might intend for us. And we sort of say, Well, I'm not as bad as other people. And we go down that list of commandments, and we say, aha! there, at least I haven't committed murder! And the implication is, 'I should at least get to be okay with God 10% of the time. Or get 10% of God's grace.'

I am always saddened when, speaking to people, especially people talking about their life in retrospect, having lived a long life, in this church, or in my hospital chaplaincy visits, but also when I speak to young people, my students at university, I hear them say: I hope in the end, God just sort of weighs up all the good I've done, and on balance compared to the wrong I've done, I hope that I come out ... okay.

That of course isn't anything to do with God's economy of grace, with the economy of grace that Jesus sums up when someone says to him, Jesus, what must I do to be saved? How does Jesus respond?

"There are only two commandments. Love the Lord your God with all thy heart, and with

all thy soul, and with all your mind. This is the first great commandment. And the second likewise is love your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-40).

So it's just as well that we don't have – beneath the Grinling Gibbons carvings – the 10 commandments judgmentally staring us down from the two wooden panels on the other side of the altar. I think they would have been at one time. No doubt there's a story there. And so much the better that they are facing us blankly.

To privilege those ten words of Scripture, surely we would use them as a measuring stick, a tool by which to judge how much grace we think we could coax from God. Or we use it as a stick to beat people with. Or they would make us into moralistic rule keepers, judging ourselves righteous above others.

Not having the inscriptions there before us tells us, I hope, that all of us are in some way responsible for breaking faith with God, with others, with what God intends for us, with the rest of the creation, more than ten times over.

And I hope that not having the Ten Commandments there before us, or can I say, I hope that having the tablets blank before us, behind the altar, is a reminder that God intends for us, not simply a 10% discount on our many failings, but his fullness of grace that simply cannot be framed in, or contained in ten verses from Scripture. That story is changing people's lives in this church. And every penny you give to this church, every pound in your pocket that goes to this church, every minute of your time you volunteer, every time you brew a cup of coffee after the service, every time you lift a chair to help, or just being here, and giving the gift of who God made you, all of that without exception goes to the work that you would want to see continue in this church. It goes to the story of grace being told in this church, day by day!

God's story is not the story of ten do's and don'ts. It is a story — finally — we hear each Sunday at the beginning of our service. Our prayer of forgiveness echoes Jesus' call to love God and love others, love yourself. And so in the prayer of Absolution we hear some version of "God forgives you: know that you are forgiven, forgive others, forgive yourself."

Yes, lives, are being changed in this church. And people are asking for their story to be joined to God's story.

Some people are being called to church ministry, lay or ordained. We have baptism and confirmation candidates in our Camino course, affirming their place in the story that the church tells. We have people affirming their own belief, convictions, and faith commitments, and are asking to be received into the Anglican church having had a life or an upbringing in another Christian tradition. And all are asking our company on their journey. As is young Harry this morning.

In this journey, grace is what God does for us because we cannot do for ourselves.

But grace is also that God chooses to do with us what God could do alone. Grace says that God chooses us, not 10% of the time, but 110% of the time.

Let me finish with a story to illustrate what I'm trying to say. I knew of a man, years ago, in California, who was dying of aids. A charity offered him a dying wish. He said he wanted an animal companion in what turned out to be the last two or so months of his life.

So, they went down to the animal shelter, and he picked out a dog: a sort of terrier mix. But this dog had a misaligned jaw, so that its teeth on the right side stuck out of its mouth. When the man saw it, he said, 'That's the dog I choose!'

Do you see what he was doing? (Amazing grace ...)

Telling the story, the man said, 'When I saw this dog, I knew it was for me. I secretly wanted a dog that with some kind of imperfection, to remind me that I am not perfect. My dog isn't perfect. He doesn't know that he isn't perfect. But does know that he is loved.'

Grace is that somehow, — and not in spite of our brokenness, but precisely because of it, — in God's economy, our story becomes God's story. Amen.

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