



Sunday 3 Year C

26th/27th January, 2019

The Holy Word of God (1)

The defining moment for the People of God in the Old Testament was when Moses went up Mount Sinai and received the Law, the Ten Commandments from God. Why? Because this was the moment when God sealed a deal, known as the Covenant, with the people of Israel whereby they became God's own people. He said "you will be my people and I shall be your God". The Ten Commandments were the rules the people must live by if they were to be faithful to their side of the deal, if they were truly to be His people.

These commandments were inscribed on two stone tablets and because this was the holy Word of God, the tablets were treated with the greatest respect and reverence and were placed in a special box covered with gold which had four poles so that it could be carried by four priests. The box was called the Ark of the Covenant. Some people may only be familiar with this through the Indiana Jones film franchise where, in *Indiana Jones and the Lost Ark*, our hero, played by Harrison Ford, is in a race against time to discover and rescue the lost Ark of the Covenant before the Nazis find it and take it home to Adolf Hitler as the greatest prize in his collection of priceless looted artefacts.

However that may be, the Ark of the Covenant was a real and most holy presence of God among his people and they carried it with them through the desert and sometimes into battle. It was considered so holy that anyone who touched the Ark would instantly die. Once the people settled in the Promised Land, the Ark was kept in shrines such as Shiloh and Bethel under the protection of a priest. When Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem, the Ark was given a permanent home at its centre in the Holy of Holies. Only the High Priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies and approach the Ark. Because of the presence of the Ark, the Temple became the holiest place on earth, the

place where God has made his home among his people, and Jerusalem was called the holy city.

In 587 BC, the Babylonians captured Jerusalem, sent all its inhabitants into exile in Babylon and destroyed the Temple. The bible tells us that the invaders took all the gold and silver vessels but no one knows what became of the Ark. Thirty years later, the Persian King, Cyrus the Great, retook Jerusalem from the the Babylonians, brought the people home from their exile and financed and oversaw the rebuilding of the Temple for the Jewish people. The first reading today describes the celebrations that took place to mark the opening of the new Temple and describes how Ezra the priest read from the Hebrew bible, known as the Book of the Law, which the interpret Ten Commandments in great detail:

On the square before the Water Gate, in the presence of the men and women, and children old enough to understand, he read from the book from early morning till noon; all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

I can't imagine all of you sitting and listening to me read from the bible from dawn until dusk, but for those people, the Word of God was so precious and the Temple so holy that this was their way of expressing their joy and gratitude to God for the restoration of their fortunes.

But for us too, the Word of God is present among us but not just as words engraved on stone tablets but in Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh. The Gospels bring him to life for us which is why we pay such reverence to the Gospel when we read it in Church. The Gospels have their own special book which we enthrone in the church. We put candles beside it to show that it is a holy and precious thing, we stand out of respect for the Gospel when it is read and welcome it by singing the Alleluia, a song of joy. We have a procession with the Gospel book to the lectern and surround it with candles and sometimes we bless it with incense. When the Gospel is announced we make the sign of the cross on our foreheads, our lips and our hearts and we say quietly "The Lord be in my heart and on my lips". At the end of the Gospel the priest lifts it up in honour and kisses it and says quietly to himself "may the words of the Gospel cleanse me from my sins".

Jesus is present in his word in a very special way. As the author of the Letter to the Hebrews tells us:

The word of God is something alive and active: it cuts like any double-edged sword but more finely: it can slip through the place where the soul is divided from the spirit, or joints from the marrow; it can judge the secret emotions and thoughts. No created thing can hide from him. (Heb 4:12)

The Word of God is powerful. It can change people's lives. Perhaps we will continue this theme next week.