

'Putting God First'. Sermon first preached by Dr Christine Hoffman at FUMC Palmetto, March 15th 2009

Yesterday morning, Stephen and had some friends visiting from Miami and we brought them to see this sanctuary. Each of us was pointing out things that we particularly like about this place. I wonder as you look about you this morning what you would pick out – maybe the altar, especially with its new paraments. Maybe the wooden cross which, during this Lenten season, has its purple hue enhanced by the purple of the paraments. If you sit in the choir, maybe it is the rose window. Whatever it is for each of you, it is probably something that characterizes a church for you, something that promotes a sense of holiness, something that makes you aware that you are in a sanctuary, a word connoting a holy place. But what is it that makes a place holy? It is surely whatever it is that helps us put God first, that stimulates us to worship him and not be wrapped up in ourselves. What makes a Christian sanctuary then? What are the essentials? There are, of course, so many Christian denominations, that it is perhaps hard to identify one essential feature. There is, however, one essential feature, which is crucial in every sense of the word. This feature is the cross. It may be a crucifix with the figure of Christ hanging on it, or it may be an empty cross. It may be ornate or plain. It may be all sorts of things. But the cross will be central, critical, and crucial to Christian worship and for a very good reason. At the heart of Christianity is Jesus who in his passion and death brought to the world the redeeming love of God. As he suffered and died, Jesus put God first. And as he lived every day of his ministry, Jesus put God first. As he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane that God might take the cup of suffering, he added the vital words: 'yet, not my will but yours be done.'

Now when we pray, as in the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, 'Your will be done', I'm not sure just how serious we are. Are we truly putting God first or are we, in fact, keen to tell God just what we think should be happening to us and ours. We then add, as a sort of postscript, that we will, if we really have to, let God's plans take priority. But this is not how Jesus lived. It is not how Jesus prayed and not just in Gethsemane. All through his life, Jesus knew what it was to say to God about everything: 'yet, not my will but yours be done.' Gethsemane and dying on the cross, which Jesus earnestly did not desire, were in no way a postscript, a one-off in an otherwise self-centered ministry. No, Jesus' whole lifestyle was to put God first. And this, I think, explains Jesus' anger as he 'poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables' in the temple in Jerusalem.

Lets think about the scene we've just heard described in the gospel of John. The other three evangelists place this in the last week rather than early in Jesus' ministry, but it does not matter what year it occurred. What does matter is that it was the Passover Festival, one of three times in the year when devout Jews tried to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. There was one and only one Temple. It was the only place where sacrifice could be offered. The synagogues were used for praying and reading the Scriptures, but the Temple was a big deal, to put it mildly, for worship. There, according to your means, you offered sacrifices. The very word sacrifice suggests something that costs you something and, as you can read in the Old Testament book of Leviticus, there were different sacrifices for different aspects of worship of God. Be it to express guilt or to

express thanksgiving, you offered your sacrifices in the Temple. So Jesus would surely expect to find in the Temple a holy place. He might expect to be at home there among people who, according to his own Jewish faith, were putting God first. But what does he find? He finds a whole load of people putting themselves first. Those who change the coins from the Roman currency with the emperor's image on it to Jewish coins acceptable for paying for sacrifices and the temple-tax have their own interests in the forefront of their minds.

Herod the Great began in 20 BCE a massive restoration and expansion of the temple that was still underway in Jesus' day. It was a magnificent place and Jesus came, as a faithful Jew, to the temple, this supremely sacred space, and the dwelling place of God on earth. But as he entered the temple precincts, Jesus found little in the way of sacred space. The outer Court of the Gentiles looked and sounded like an open-air market. Cattle bellowing, sheep bleating, turtledoves cooing, people yelling, coins clanging. Did this all have to go on in the one area in the temple precincts where the Gentiles were allowed to enter and pray?

All this is why Jesus is so angry. What is going on makes a mockery of putting God first. The trappings of worship are still in place but Jews and Gentiles are being cheated as they try to worship. Those coming to the temple to sacrifice and pray are trying to put God first. Many, like Jesus, will have traveled long distances. They have put themselves out to put God first. They genuinely approach God with the attitude: 'Your will be done'. But what about the moneychangers and those selling the animals and birds for sacrifice? Jesus' ferocity suggests that the temple functionaries are actually acting in opposition to God's purposes. 'Not your will but mine be done' characterizes their religiosity. Me first, not God first, is their motto.

I began this sermon by asking you to think what makes a church a holy place, a sanctuary. We arrived at the conclusion that it is all that is here, be it what we see or what we hear that helps us put God first. Supremely, it is the cross witnessing to us of God's redeeming love in Jesus and calling for our response. Now I have a question for you. If this is what makes a church a holy place, what makes a synagogue a holy place? What would have to be found in a synagogue to enable Jews to worship? The answer is two things, a reading desk and a holy ark. These can be elaborate or simple. But both show the centrality of the Law in the Jewish Faith. For Christians, the cross of Christ is central and crucial. For Jews, the Law of God is what is essential and vital. In the Ark, even if it is just a plain closet, are the scrolls of the Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Wherever the synagogue (. For example, Amsterdam as on public television; Savannah as in our New Year trip; Sarasota as in this afternoon's concert that Mary Shields kindly tipped me off about), and whatever kind: Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, whatever the origins, be they Sefardi or Ashkenazi, Eastern or Western, the Torah will be at the heart of worship. Often there is something else above the holy ark or 'sanctuary' as Sefardi Jews call it. There are often two tablets representing the Ten Commandments and giving the first two words of each commandment in Hebrew.

So what would you expect to be the first words on these two tablets above the Ark in a synagogue? As Christians, we regard the first commandment as ‘You shall have no other gods before me.’ But in the Jewish tradition, the first commandment is: ‘I am the LORD your God.’ We might say that this isn’t a command so much as a word, but then that is what the Ten Commandments are, the Ten Words, Decalogue (in Greek). And the very first word is: ‘I am the LORD your God’. This then continues: ‘who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have other gods before me.’ This is taken with: ‘You shall not make for yourself an idol ...’ as the second commandment in Judaism. It is, however, very significant that the first commandment in Judaism is: ‘I am the LORD your God’ for from this follows everything else. In this way, God is put first. It is because God is the LORD, the great I am, that he rescued his people. And it is because he rescued his people that there is no room for anything else in the first position.

I wonder if this reminds you of anything in our Christian tradition. I’m thinking of the words: ‘We love because he first loved us.’ (1 John 4:19) For us as Christians putting God first is acknowledging that it is God who took the initiative. It is God who sent Jesus to rescue his people, to demonstrate on the cross his redeeming love for humankind. It is from this that all else follows. The Ten Commandments we heard read this morning a very good sample of the many laws in the Old Testament. Some are ritual and some are ethical; some are dos and some are don’ts. But all of them are expressions of what it is to put God first, to subject our will to his, to say to God, not as an afterthought, but as our first thought: ‘Your will be done’.

The Ten Commandments are not meant to be a burden, something we abide by reluctantly so that God will not get angry with us. They are what he gives us in order to respond to the God who asks us to put him first. First in what? In everything. In every aspect of life. And remember, these commandments are not ten good maxims for living the good life; these are the living words of God himself. I recommend to you to spend time, at least on one day, in the coming week, using the insert from the bulletin. If you glance at it, you will see that it begins with words from John’s account of the cleansing of the temple that we’ve thought about this morning. On this front cover is a visual depiction of law. Inside are words from Psalm 19. Then there are four activities. We are asked to ‘Reflect’ on how God’s law can help us. We are asked to ‘Explore’ our gospel passage from this morning. Then on the back cover we are asked to ‘Wonder’ about how God’s commandments can set us free. Finally, we are asked to ‘Live’ to live as the people of God. To be the people of God, we need to claim God as our God, not meaning that he is no one else’s God but that he alone is our God. The Decalogue was understood by the ancient Israelites to be the Word of God that described their obligation and their side of the covenant. Thus all aspects of their relationship with God and with one another were understood within the context of this covenant. Jesus, you may remember, emphasized the importance of God’s commandments (Mt 5:17). He called for not less obedience to God but more obedience. For us as Christians, Jesus himself becomes the Word of God. Not only in his teaching but also in his living, his dying, and his rising, Jesus is putting God first. If we will, Jesus enables us to live putting God first.

The great reformer, Martin Luther had some very significant things to say on these opening words of Exodus 20: 'Then God spoke all these words: I am the LORD your God'. In 1522, in his personal prayer book, Luther wrote: 'I take the risk of placing my confidence only in the one, invisible, inscrutable, and only god, who created heaven and earth and who alone is superior to all creation. Again, I am not terrified by all the wickedness of the devil and his cohorts because God is superior to them all.

I would believe in God not a bit less if everyone were to forsake me and persecute me. I would believe in God no less if I were poor, unintelligent, uneducated, despised, or lacking in everything. I believe no less though I am a sinner. For this manner of faith will of necessity rise over all that does or does not exist, over sin and virtue and all else, thus depending purely and completely upon God as the First commandment enjoins me to do.

I do not ask for any sign from God to put him to the test. I trust in him steadfastly, no matter how long he may delay, prescribing neither a goal, nor a time, nor a measure, nor a way for God to respond to me, but leaving all to his divine will in a free, honest, and genuine faith.'

I normally begin my sermons with words from Psalm 19, but today, I would like us all to end with them. If you would turn please to the second page of the insert in the bulletin and say the words in bold print in the center of the page: **Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.'** This week may all our words and meditations and all the actions that flow from them be acceptable to God. May we keep our focus in this Lenten period on the cross of Christ as it shows us Jesus putting God first.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen