

All three readings this morning concern themselves with how someone who is in relationship with God might behave. One may be forgiven for thinking that the theme for today is 'The old laws of Moses giving way to some new laws of Christ'.

To many, and certainly to the secular world in general, Christianity can appear to be a religion of Dos and Don'ts. I don't know about you, but people in the secular world often say or do things and then, knowing I am a Christian, turn to me and say – oops, sorry, I shouldn't say that, or I shouldn't have done that should I?

Religion to others, and perhaps even to us, can often seem to be a series of unwieldy or even outdated rules and regulations. Thou shalt, thou shalt not. But the passages today make it abundantly clear that this is not what God intends.

The Old Testament is about freedom. Freedom from the slavery of sin. The New Testament is about Freedom from sin, too, and freedom from the religious knots humankind ties itself up in, when trying to respond to that freedom.

James, and Jesus in Mark tell us something of fundamental importance. It is at the heart of Christianity. So important that every word the Apostle Paul wrote also sought to make it clear. Following Christ is not about following a set of rules and regulations which will hopefully alter one's behaviour in time. It is about recognising, accepting one is forgiven, despite one's sins. The response will be that we begin to behave in a certain way; a different way. Often a way that is different from the way the rest of the world might expect to behave.

Now, I apologise if what I am about to say offends one or two of you here this morning but - I almost cheered when I heard the news this week that Channel 4 have decided to axe Big Brother. The 'game show', that put a group of mismatched people together in a confined space for weeks on end and stood back to see what would happen. Light touch paper and retire.

My joy at its demise may be particularly heretical as one of the people responsible for bringing the programme to our screens in the first place was Peter Bazalgette, by all accounts a really nice and hugely talented man, and a member of the family whose memory we preserve here in St Mary's – their monuments are all around us. So, sorry Peter – nothing personal.

You see, for me, Big Brother unearthed much in the human spirit which none of us are proud of. No bad thing in itself, I suppose.

In the Gospel reading we just heard, Jesus lists many of the kinds of things that we humans are capable of; thoughts and behaviours which defile the person.

But, more often than I think was good for any of us, that's all Big Brother did: unearth our darker side and then leave it dangling, uncommented upon, for us to make of it what we will. Take it or leave it. No help. No hope.

Not all of the time, though. Once in a while, a Housemate, upon being voted off the show, would be confronted by the show's presenter Davina McCall in the studio. He or she would be shown a sequence of clips in which it was clear they had behaved in an extremely vile manner.

Sometimes they would try and justify their behaviour. But sometimes, just once in a while, they would stare horrified at what they saw and admit that they did not recognise themselves. On these occasions, I was frequently left wondering whether the experience would effect a change in them? Or whether, once they were out of the public gaze, they'd carry on being that same person they'd always been. The person they'd been confronted with in the clips.

This is a little like what the Apostle James in the New Testament reading is saying. We look at ourselves in the mirror and, although being confronted with the truth of who we are, once we turn away, we tend to forget our faults and carry on as before.

We even forget that God knows all our secrets, even the secrets of our hearts. Very scary. Almost too scary – so the temptation is to push that thought to the back of the mind. At least I do sometimes when I'm behaving in a way I may not be proud of... I don't know about you.

So, James says, to help us, be not just hearers of the word, but doers. What does he mean by this? Well, I think he's arguing that we will, naturally, once we realise we are held in the unconditional love of God – despite who we are and the dark secrets of our hearts – start to respond accordingly. Bit by bit, we will slowly let go those attitudes that defile us and start to rejoice in being the beloved of God.

This is not, we notice, by starting to adopt strict religious codes and practices, though. And this, too, is Jesus' teaching in the Gospel passage. We have been set free from behaviours imposed upon us from without. And, in that freedom, we are, by definition, now able to make choices. These include behavioural choices. But how does that work, exactly?

At school, I found homework particularly boring, difficult and onerous. I used to love Biology, but even then often never managed to do the homework. Homework was such a chore. Once out of school, the last thing I wanted to do was more school work. I was continually asked why I hadn't handed in some work or other, or why it was so slapdash and had clearly involved little or no effort.

But these were the rules, weren't they? And the rules seemed to make it even harder. Thou shalt do the homework. Thy homework shall be at least ten pages in length and in thine best handwriting. Thou shalt use a ruler at all times when underlining. Thou shalt hand it in on time.

Regrettably, I found the rules restrictive, difficult to comply with and, at times, unbearable.

If we believe that the Good News of the saving work of Jesus Christ means following slavishly a set of rules and closely defined behaviours then we will find the life of a Christian is restrictive, difficult to comply with and, at times, unbearable.

One day my biology teacher – the excellent Mr Pickering, for the record – took me to one side at the end of class.

'Booth?'

'Yes sir?'

'You don't appear to have handed in your homework again this afternoon.'

'No sir. Sorry sir.'

'Well, listen... you enjoy Biology, don't you?'

'Yes sir. I really do.'

'Then, I will never ask you for your homework again. I will set it and you will be free to choose whether to do it or not. I shall leave it entirely up to you. You will not get into any trouble from me if you don't do it. Your choice.'

I was forgiven in advance. I was told that whatever I did, I would be forgiven. That changed my whole outlook. It changed me. And I responded to that grace accordingly. The one subject I did homework for and handed it in complete and on time every time from then on was Biology.

The 'Thou Shalts' became 'I Wills'.

In many ways, of course, the 'thou shalt' hadn't changed. But I had: I did do my homework, ten pages, underlined and got it in on time. We should remember that Jesus' list of behaviours in the Gospel reading is linked to the Ten Commandments.

How we respond to that forgiveness-in-advance, that freedom, is what matters. When Jesus heals ten lepers, 9 skip away rejoicing. Only one comes back to give thanks and to praise God and, we might risk inferring, changes his behaviour and sees what he can do in return.

Christ's saving work has released us from any legalistic approach to faith – legalistic approaches, for example, as recorded in Jesus' dialogue with the scribes and Pharisees about purity codes and food laws. And, in that release, we are free to choose how we conduct ourselves. That freedom, time and time again, produces a wonderfully positive and affirming reaction in the liberated person.

Moreover, we pray, read scripture, meet with one another, help our neighbours, and gather here Sunday by Sunday to lift our voices in worship not because we ought to. We do all these things because, either knowingly or unknowingly, we are developing more fully a sense of quite how free we are under God's grace; quite how liberated we have been through the saving work of Jesus Christ; quite how much joy we can experience in our freedom by working in concert with the Holy Spirit.

Knowing we are free and responding to that freedom releases us from those behaviours and attitudes that Jesus tells us lurk within ourselves. They cannot be got out any other way; certainly not by strict religious codes and observances. When we look in the mirror then turn away, we may forget. When we gaze on the face of Christ in relationship with him and with one another, and recognise there his forgiveness freely given, we are less likely to forget. We are, rather, more likely to grow in our response to God; to grow more fully into the person God longs for us to be, and indeed the person he has set us free to be.

Thanks be to God

Amen.