

Lent 1, March 2024, Year B:

John 2.13-22, 1 Corinthians 3.18-22, Exodus 20.1-17, Psalm 19. 7-end

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, **out of the house of slavery**; you shall have no other gods before me.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight our maker and redeemer. (Psalm 19.14)

Every three years I am reminded of Krzysztof Kieślowski's 1988 cinematic masterpiece based on the Ten Commandments, *The Decalogue*. Kieślowski was a Polish film director and screenwriter. Stanley Kubrick the director of film classics such as *Space Odyssey* (1968), *Clockwork Orange* (1971) and *Dr Strangelove* (1964) said of the acclaimed Polish mini-series that it was the only "film masterpiece" he could think of. High praise indeed.

Of course I am referencing Kieślowski because of today's reading of the Ten Commandments, which has served as a guide for hundreds of millions of Jews and Christians for more than three millennia. Some track record. In time they served Kieślowski as the basis for his ten-part meditation connecting them to his present.

The first of Kieślowski's ten one-hour cameos is a reflection on the first commandment "You shall have no other Gods but me." It has God speaking these words to Moses, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." These words are spoken to the people of Israel. How are we Gentiles to hear them? We are to hear them as being directed at us. They should have immediacy. They are meant for us. As Paul writes in his letter to the church in Rome, we have been grafted into the vine that is Israel. (Romans 11:14-27) We have been grafted into the Mosaic covenant and all the other covenants, Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamic, Davidic with our preacher last Sunday focussing on the Abrahamic covenant. These covenants are a part of our heritage. They are a part of who we are and who are becoming. Who are we? We are people in relationship to God. Egypt was to become for the people of Israel a house of slavery having first been for them first a house of refuge, then a house of flourishing and finally a house of bondage.

Before proceeding having referenced Stanley Kubrick it is important to keep in mind that although Kieślowski was on the other side of the Iron Curtain or as we used to say **behind it** an exchange of ideas concerning the deeper meaning of things continued in Europe and beyond in many different and fruitful ways. At the time we may not have realised it because the Soviet threat was existential that we ourselves were also in a house of slavery, be it vastly preferable on the other side. I would recommend the writings of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who was also kept in a house of slavery for a time, a Gulag, a forced labour camp. What we see unfolding in Russia especially exemplified by the treatment and death of Alexei Navalny, a person of faith, and the shenanigans to do with his corpse is reminiscent of that time. Navalny said, "It is the fact that I am a Christian, I was once a militant atheist myself, but now I am a believer and it helps me a lot in my activities, because everything becomes much easier, I think about things less. There are fewer dilemmas in my life." We give thanks for all those who during those troubled times ensured that despite the Cold War people continued to interact with one other. Even today many are still able to carry on a meaningful dialogue across the continent and further afield steeped in an intellectual living tradition that stretches back in time to Mesopotamia and beyond.

Returning to the Commandments what does Jesus say about the Law and the Prophets? He says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; "I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished." (Matthew 5.17-20) Jesus goes on to say that we are to keep/observe these commandments to the end, all our days and to teach them. We are to put ourselves under them. We are dwell within them. Why? Because they give us a way to order our common life that we may have direction, purpose and be sheltered from sin. The sin that clings so closely, which hurts others and ourselves and is detrimental to our health, the health of others and the health of the community.

The Law staying with the metaphor is also a house, but it is a house in which the God of mercy and compassion, the long suffering God, is the landlord and not a Pharaoh, who did not know Joseph nor a system governed by the Polit Büro or today leaders not fit for purpose. Jesus states that his kingdom is not of this world. Once we know ourselves members of His kingdom there is a new freedom that seeks to live in that kingdom. An elemental part of that new freedom is not to

undertake anything that diminishes the place of God in our lives, who makes a home in us: “you shall have no other gods before me” or “you shall **set** no other gods before me”.

Every house of this world whatever it be and I challenge us to identify continuously and in particular during this season of Lent, where we seek to find our freedom anew by turning off our various electronic devices, but banning them from the family table, by seeking to develop meaningful conversations with our nearest and dearest. Some of these are trivial. I know, but we need to make a start. Lent can be a house where we make time to renew friendships. Where we make time to contribute to the world’s good by acts of service. Where we free ourselves from addictions that our getting a hold of us.

Jesus says of the Temple, a house that not one stone will remain on another. How does Jesus give expression to this in John’s gospel, “Destroy this temple, and I in three days I will raise it up again.” Many see this as a prophecy foretelling the Temple’s destruction by four Roman legions under Titus’ command in 70 AD. Others say that the prophecy concerning the destruction of the temple is put in Jesus’ mouth after the fact. Jesus’ emphasis is not on the destruction of the Temple as a building, but on Jesus rebuilding the house of Israel as a spiritual temple in His name. The temple is no longer a building, but a body into which we are grafted by baptism. It was appropriate that Bishop David during his farewell service led us one final time in affirming our baptismal vows saying at the end of the service with accustomed graciousness, “Thank you for the opportunity to have led you one last time in the affirmation of baptismal vows because that [baptism] is what binds us to our Lord as his friends and what binds us to each other in Christ’s holy catholic church.”

In the first episode of Kieślowski’s Decalogue, all episodes play on a Polish council estate, the three main persons are the father, his son Pawel and Pawel’s aunt his father’s sister. Pawel’s father inhabits a house of humanity’s making. It is the house of rationality, of mathematics, of statistics, of measurement, and where logic reigns supreme. Rationality is his God. The living God is dead. Pawel’s father looks forward to a time when the computer will gain conscientious and develop individuality. The computer turns itself on and off mysteriously. Remember Kieślowski’s Decalogue was released in 1988. The whereabouts of Pawel’s mother is uncertain. Did she flee to the West? Did she die? Did she leave the family? Her absence is not explained.

Father and son enjoy a loving relationship. They delight in each other's company. Pawel too enjoys the world of mathematics, computing and has already written some computing codes. He wonders if the computer can dream and has questions about death and about God.

Pawel's aunt in contrast to her brother does believe in God and answers Pawel's questions about believing saying, "God is, if you simply believe." Pawel asks her another question in response, "Who is God?" His aunt replies by inviting him to come to her. She takes Pawel into a close and warm embrace and after a little while asks, "What do you feel?" Pawel answers, "I feel love". She answers, "I do too. And God is also with us." The tragedy that marks Kieślowski's first meditation soon unfolds. Pawel has been given ice skates for Christmas. His father works out that the ice will hold by entering the data from the local meteorological station into the computer thereby determining the thickness of the ice. Before going to bed the father checks the ice and on returning home finds Pawel awake. Pawel couldn't sleep because he knew his father would go check the ice for himself trusting in his senses. As the tragedy unfolds what is evident to all on the council estate takes a very long time for Pawel's father to grasp his calculations, his rationality, his sense based view will not allow it. The ice did not hold. Throughout the episode there is a mysterious figure sitting in front of a fire by the river. Who is this mysterious figure? Could this person huddled in front of a fire be the very presence of God? As Pawel's Father finally grasps that he is lost his son, his sister, Pawel's aunt comes to him and embracing him from behind, while the assembled crowd fall on their knees as the corpses of the children are drawn out of the water. Pawel's aunt after a longer embrace also falls on her knees leaving the father standing alone amongst this crowd of mourners who kneel before the mystery of life and before their God. In his grief the father goes to the temporary altar that has been erected in a church that is being built on the council estate and pushes it over. We see the icon of the Madonna with child weep being a replica of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa. The last footage is of Pawel running towards a camera with a bunch of other children full of the joy of life and with which the cameo begins.

The episode as you will have sensed is deeply moving and troubling. Having watched it again it has stayed with me. The houses we inhabit will shape us. They will imprison us or they will open us to wonder and mystery of life. Our faith in God, in Jesus Christ, should always be freeing us from the houses of slavery of our own making. And we do need to be set free in a world beset by ideologies more

numerous than we wish to admit. The house that Pawel's aunt inhabits, the house of faith in the living God, can and should equip us for the darkest hours so that we can still go towards the other. Still have faith. Pawel's aunt has no words of comfort. Words will not suffice. They will seem empty in this hour, but her love for her brother and her nephew will. Her love for her brother means that she can go towards him and embrace him with love, philia and agape. And in this hour he who is devastated can receive her love for him. He can be comforted despite his loss, which is also the aunt's loss. In the moment of her loss she who is without child does not look to herself but to her brother. Remember Pawel's questions about God and the dialogue that ensued. "What do you feel?" "I feel love". "I do too. And God is also with us." This is the house we inhabit. May we inhabit it well, for our comfort, for our freedom, and for the sake of those, Lord, you have entrusted to us in His name and for His sake. **Amen.**