

Christianity should come with a health warning. Anyone who thinks being Christian will make them more socially acceptable, a better citizen of this world, needs to think again. A common thread running through today's readings is how valuing what God values will bring us into conflict with the values of our world. Christian faith, followed wholeheartedly, will almost always at some point bring us into conflict with others and with the way most 'normal' people think and behave.

Let's start with the scene between Jesus and the stall-holders in the temple. It's a clash of values. The money changers and animal sellers were upholding the religious laws on the surface. They were there so people could buy animals to use as sacrifices as the law required. But we can assume that sitting underneath was another value, to do with the wealth of the temple, and their own personal wealth. The temple had become a place to do business. Business with a religious flavour, but business nonetheless.

To Jesus, this was a blasphemy. The temple was his Father's house, a place of prayer, a place where God's glory was present. It was meant to be a place where people would encounter the Divine. And because ultimately God's love and presence are a gift – abundantly available to all – to fill God's house with exchange, with buying and selling and profiting and lining of pockets was a terrible corruption of what the temple was meant to represent. And so Jesus gets his rant on.

Our first reading was a list of values that we call the Ten Commandments. They're an ancient list, but they still provide important insight into the building blocks of a good society. The commandments start with the holiness and hiddenness of the Divine Name as the starting point for true religion – no glib slogans, limiting images or idolatry. We can't have God in our back pockets. And then they're about balancing work and rest, honouring elders, honesty, faithfulness, and refusing to allow greed to take hold in common life.

And we heard from the Apostle Paul, who sets the vulnerable and humiliating choices of God against the so-called wisdom of our world. The 'wisdom' of the Roman Empire was that what really matters is nobility, beauty, and being able to beat your opponent in a battle of either weapons or words. Against this 'wisdom', Christianity preached a crucified God, a 'loser' who was defeated by

the system. Christianity was considered ridiculous and undignified in a culture that was all about strength and status.

There was a time in the history of the Western world, where Christianity (or at least a form of it) massively influenced all aspects of life – from the justice system to the welfare system to how many days in the week people could work and shop and so on. That is, there was a big overlap between what people understood as God's values, and how society structured itself. That time ended in the middle of the 20th century. And it hasn't taken long for a chasm to form between some of the values we want to continue to uphold in the Church, and the values promoted by our postmodern, neoliberal world. Not in all cases – there are plenty of so-called 'secular' people with whom I find a great deal in common.

But I also notice an increasing sense of struggle, as Christians with one foot on either side of the chasm find themselves being pulled in two directions, as they try to be faithful on the one hand to their commitments in the 'world', and on the other hand to their faith. Even just in terms of really basic stuff like – will I go to church, or go to my sport training? Will I take time for prayer, or do an extra hour of work? Participation in worship and Christian community is so often now being wedged in as an optional extra around the main priorities that have become central to our lives...work, socialising, and shopping.

But it's not just about how we spend time. Faith, after all, is not the same thing as attending church every week and shouldn't be reduced to that. It's about what values are embedded in our hearts. It's about what we see when we look at the world. Who we love and seek to serve, and what we refuse to support. What we laugh about, and who we refuse to laugh at. What makes us glad, and what breaks our hearts. It's about learning to recognise the – often conflicting – values around us and being able to uphold some while separating ourselves from others.

Last week I found myself in a strained and difficult discussion with some of our neighbours, who would like us to move on a couple of homeless people who are sleeping rough in our church carpark and causing some anxiety. I understand the anxiety, but at the same time, I believe as a church we have some duty of compassion towards our homeless neighbours if they need help.

Our neighbours with houses couldn't see that the needs of those without should be considered at all. This is ultimately a clash of values about who is a deserving human, and who is our neighbour.

That's just one example. Every day, the world asks us in a myriad of ways to narrow our definition of neighbour to include only our nearest and dearest. It asks us to forget our identity as God's children, and live anxiously, with stress and toil. We forget that God embedded Sabbath rest and prayer at the heart of God's vision of a good society. The world asks us to accept that noise and busyness, information bombardment, competition, outrage and selfishness are normal, and that stillness, peacefulness, and practising the presence of God are luxuries we can't afford. The world tells us that we can't rely on anyone except ourselves, that we must stand on our own two feet and pull ourselves up by the bootstraps. And yet our Scriptures invite us to radical trust in God's provision like the sparrows and the lilies, and to immerse ourselves in communities where God's people hold their goods in common and seek to meet one another's needs.

In these ways, and so many more, we are tempted to live by values that are not God's. Instead of digging into these issues, in our religion, we have often focused on personal morality, especially sexual morality, and giving the right impression – being 'acceptable', decent citizens. We have done this at the expense of the life of prayer, the pilgrimage of the spiritual life and the service of the least. Most of those whom we now celebrate as reformers – William Wilberforce for example – would have been considered dangerous and offensive for their views by Christians who couldn't see past the status quo.

Remember that Jesus is at his most 'unacceptable', his most morally dubious and shocking to nice church-going people when driving out the animals and turning over tables in the temple. And he did this because the nature of true religion had been perverted. The symbol of God's power and presence had been cluttered up with burdensome rules and the emblems of profit and greed. Prayer had been replaced by trade.

We might not have buying and selling in our church, but we need to be on our guard about letting our religious life reflect cultural values that are not also gospel values. The work of prayer is partly about getting our hearts lined up

with God's values. And this requires deep discernment because it is so often at odds with how our world sees. We are all prone to believe that 'what God values' is the same thing as 'what's important to me'. And 'what's important to me' has been shaped in us by all sorts of influences, many of which have nothing to do with God. It's quite common for Christians on both the political left and right to assume that God supports their ideology – we are all prone to make God in our image.

To learn God's values requires daily immersion in the alternative realm that Jesus named the 'Kingdom of Heaven' and being formed by it in our deepest hearts. It takes a deep engagement with Scripture, prayer, and the Christian community to learn to live and serve in our society with the eyes of God's Spirit. But that is what we are called to do. In the words of Julian of Norwich, "God did not say 'you will not be tempted, you will not be sorely troubled; you will not be distressed.' But God said 'you will not be overcome.'" God give us the grace and the discipline to act on our calling.