

What is football? Not a question I imagine anybody asks very often. Why do people watch football? must be more commonly asked: yes, when England is playing, it's difficult not to watch, just like a car accident happening in slow motion. But, each to their own, the game is incredibly popular, we can't all like the same things, it keeps them occupied so we can get on with the interesting stuff uninterrupted etc. etc.

So back to the question. What is football? Or let me put it another way, so you can see where I'm going, what makes football *football*? What makes it football and not netball or polo or just a random clump of blokes kicking an inflated pigs bladder around a field? The answer, of course, is... rules. Without a set number of players per side or the concept of fouls or restrictions on which part of your body can come into contact with the ball or the offside rule (whatever that is and please don't explain it to me afterwards I don't care and I'm only pretending not to know what it is). Without Association Football rules it's not football, it's a toddler hitting random notes on a piano keyboard thinking that's all there is to a Lang Lang performance. Almost, but not quite. It might be all the same notes as a Mozart sonata the two year old is hitting, but it's not *music* without the rules. Even the music of Stockhausen which *sounds* for all the world just like a toddler hitting notes at random *was* playing by the rules when the composer 'wrote' his work, which is why people pay money to go to a concert and hear it, and they book a seat to hear St Mary's Toddlers playing what sounds remarkably like the same thing.

Rules make a thing what it is. Rules constrain yes, they prevent. And they create. Like a fence round a field, they mark out what is included and what is not, they make this patch of grass, something rather than just another thing.

[The Old Testament reading today is a set of rules] (Big chunks of the Hebrew Scriptures are devoted to rules): straight from the mountain, hot from the holy press. (including) Some of the most famous rules in history, the Ten Commandments. You can still sometimes find a church with the Famous Ten emblazoned behind the altar — the Reformers thought that was reasonable compensation for their destruction of centuries of Western art and culture. In some parts of the USA they are compulsorily displayed in schools for pupils to ignore like they ignore all the other rules. Although it's rare to find anyone who can list all ten off the top of their head—there's a challenge for the after service refreshments—, billions of people over the best part of three millennia have heard, marked, learned and inwardly digested the Ten Commandments. So I think it would be reasonable to ask of this set of rules, what are they for? What do they create? As the rules of rhythm and harmony make

music, and the rules of fouls and teams make football, what are the ten commandments intended to make?

Let's start with what they are not for. The ten commandments were not given as a law code for 21st century American schoolchildren, or Elizabethan churchgoers or us faithful few gathered here today. They're not, because none of the scriptures were written with our times in mind, or any other times other than the times the scribe put pen to parchment and let rip. Before you decide which one to break first- again- let me state that doesn't mean they're not *relevant* to us or senior grades in Texas or everybody else who's read them over the past few thousand years. They may well have relevance for us, but that's not what they were *for*. We can enjoy Mozart's music, but it wasn't written for *us*.

It's no coincidence that the Hebrew Bible laws were given to Moses when the Israelites had been wandering some time in the wilderness. Rudderless and aimless, roaming in the wastelands they were a mob a spark away from a riot, complaining, fractious, defiant. Imagine a typical church congregation; hungry, thirsty, bored, footsore transplanted into the desert, forced to sing unfamiliar hymns and missing the final of Strictly: then times that atmos by twenty. The Hebrews share vague kinship bonds and a recent history of regretfully leaving the fleshpots behind, but little else binds them together: with the Law and Commandments, they became a people; finally they are the nation God had promised to Abraham as his descendants. The Hebrews are a rabble in the wilderness: by giving the commandments, God creates a people and thus a civilisation is woven.

The Ten Commandments are basic stuff, at least the parts that don't refer to God, the bits about how humans should treat each other are (though of course it is a false division here as anywhere else in the Jewish Law to separate moral and religious law). No society, no tribe would last long were it constantly coveting, sleeping with others' spouses, lying in court, murdering.

These parts are about personal behaviour, about controlling, directing your own actions— not other peoples— and out of these a society emerges, a chosen people fit for the God of Israel. This is how a people are made, a common agenda to coalesce around.

The anthropologist Margaret Mead— her of dodgy doings in Samoa fame— was once asked by a student what she considered to be the first sign of civilisation in a culture. The student expected Mead to talk about something like fishhooks or clay

pots or grinding stones. If they'd asked me I'd have said cake forks— you don't get more civilised than that— but that's why I'm not an anthropologist. What Mead replied was, none of those things. The first sign of civilisation in an ancient culture is a femur that had been broken and then healed. In the animal kingdom, if you break your thigh bone (that's what your femur is) if you break it, you die. You cannot run from danger, you cannot get to the river for a drink or hunt for food. You are meat for prowling beasts. No animal survives a broken leg long enough for the bone to heal.

A broken femur that has healed is evidence that someone has taken time to stay with the one who fell, bound up the wound; has carried the person to safety and tended the m through recovery. Helping someone else is where civilisation starts. We might say, it starts when somebody, somewhere has loved their neighbours as themselves.

So most civilisations have very similar basic rules and laws- about property, about human life, about fair treatment, that are pretty much expansions of the broken thighbone and so with the Jewish Law. There is much there that is universal, that, is so basic to human society is seems to hardly need stating, until you actually meet some real humans, that is.

But most of the Hebrew Law is incredibly specific to a time, a place and a people, because these are rules to make a *people*, to make *a nation*. The Law is given by God to make Israel *Israel*. And what is really different for Israel is that their rules come not from Caesar or the King or Parliament but from *God*. This is why the legal code is the holiest of Hebrew scriptures, why some of the Psalms bang on at length about how great are Israel's laws, commandments and ordinances, sweeter than honey, more precious than gold. Nobody's ever said that about the Highway Code. Israel's is not, however, some weird lawyer cult. They are to be a holy people. They are to be the nation that shows the way to God for all the others. As subsequent history will show, it is an unimaginable privilege, and an unbearable burden.

So, where does this leave us as Christians?

The Hebrew Scriptures are part of our scriptures, though we are not ourselves Hebrews. Many of the laws that formed Ancient Israel will not apply to us; and some will. We share our similarities, but we are a different people with a different purpose; despite our common heritage, we play by different rules.

The rules of the Christian game are both *few*— they will fit on the back of a small envelope with room left over for your shopping list— and *demanding*— followed to the letter they will direct almost everything that you think and do and say. Short is easy to remember but not necessarily easy to do. The rules of our faith encompass the universal laws that change humanity from bickering bonobos into the creature made in the divine image *and* they motion us beyond ourselves, to God; to make us:

*a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.*

The reach of our rules contains the concerns of the Ten Commandments *and* legislates to build a nation beyond borders, of all peoples, races and languages, no longer Greek or Jew, no slave or free, no male and female.

There is the thighbone law, also known as the golden rule.

*Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

And the people builder:

*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind; and Love your neighbour as yourself.*

Both can be also found in the Old Testament. That much we share. And then is the new commandment:

*Love one another, as I have loved you.*

Seems innocuous, but that is the really demanding one. Not because it orders us to love, but because it commands us to love as God has loved us. *That* love brought the universe into being. Gave its only Son. Laid down its life. *That* love walked the way of the Cross, suffered and died for those who could only respond with hate.

*Love one another, as I have loved you.*

A scandal. An impossibility. The new commandment. *Our* commandment.