

Revd Canon Dr Rosalyn Murphy

Week 5: Psalm 147.13-21

The little brown girl sat in church wearing a pink dress with bold white polka-dots. It was one of her favourite dresses because she also had matching white ribbons and 'Sunday dress' shoes, which she could only wear to church. Sundays were 'dress up' days where everyone went to meet King Jesus – Jesus was a very handsome, young white man with long blonde hair and blue eyes. She had seen his picture in loads of churches, sometimes he looked a bit different but he was always white. She knew this was because being holy meant being made 'white as snow', but you also had to follow all of God's Laws.

Today, she was listening to the minister preach about just that – God's Laws. She had learnt about the Ten Commandments in Sunday School. God's Laws were ten rules that everyone had to keep in order to become 'white as snow'. She sat and went through them in her mind. There were "Thou shalt not" rules which meant you could not or should not do them because it was a sin. And, the whole purpose of going to church was to get rid of sin and become holy – 'white as snow' like Jesus. To her, it seemed so awfully hard to do, especially when you are only six years old.

She had tried very hard to memorise all the laws so she wouldn't forget – "Thou shalt not" worship other Gods. That was an easy law because she only knew one God. "Thou shalt not" make images of God, that was an easy one too. Jesus, who was God's son was God as a person, like other people today, but different.

He never sinned. He was perfect, and followed all of God's laws perfectly! So, this explained why he was 'white as snow' and why it was okay to have his picture in the church – so people could see what holy people looked like.

"Thou shalt not" use God's name in the wrong way – this was profanity, it was a big word for six year old, but she knew that word because she had grown up learning that 'cussing' was not allowed. She didn't know any 'cuss' words, but if and when she did – she could not use them with God's name. The best way to handle this she thought, was simply not to use the words at all, then she wouldn't make any mistakes.

The next law she knew was to "Remember the Sabbath" – another easy one because the Sabbath was why they went to church on Sunday – the Lord's Day. The Sabbath was a day to completely rest, spend time with the family, and not go to work. It started on Friday evening after work. When her Dad came home on Friday the family always prayed before dinner, thanking God for blessing them throughout the week. And, on Saturdays (which was also the Sabbath), her parents never went to work – but, spent time having fun with the little brown girl and her sisters.

But, Sundays were just as special – even more so, which is why they went to church, even when the little brown girl felt sick. Her parents believed there was healing in God's house through Jesus. So the best place to be on Sunday (if you were sick), was in church on the front row, sitting still and quiet, so God could see and heal you.

Then, “Honour your father and mother”, if you didn’t – God had given parents a ‘rod of discipline’ that should not be spared. It was used to remind children to keep this special law. She had never actually seen the ‘rod’ but, she had experienced spankings, sitting in the closet or on the hallway steps – where she was instructed to pray, and ask God’s forgiveness when she misbehaved.

In all of this, she was getting better and found some of God’s Laws easy. But, some of God’s other Laws were a bit more tricky. “Thou shalt not” steal. She had learnt that this law especially applied to the chocolate turtle clusters hidden in her Mum’s chest-of-drawers. She had found them by accident one day when looking for hairpins, and thought her mother wouldn’t mind sharing a few, because ‘giving generously’ was part of being holy.

When she found the chocolates, she had eaten one immediately – it was simply delicious! So she shared another two with herself to save for later – just in case she was sent to bed early or had to sit on the hallway steps. She thought it was sharing, her mother later explained it was stealing.

“Thou shalt not” do adultery. This law was really hard to understand, so, she knew it couldn’t apply to 6-year olds. The Sunday School teacher had explained that only married couples could break this law. “Thou shalt not” kill or lie or take or even want something that belonged to others. Now, that was a hard one. How could you not want what others had, when some people had so many wonderful things, while others didn’t have much?

The little brown girl smoothed her dress and closed her eyes, not to sleep while the minister preached, but to remember the summer day she had gone work with her mother. Her mother worked for a very wealthy family, that lived in a big fine house on the other side of town. It was the side of town where only holy white people lived. While her mother worked, she had been allowed to play with the children who lived there. The little brown girl was surprised when she saw that the two sister didn’t act holy. Instead, they were quite mean. They pulled her braids and took her hair ribbons – wasn’t that stealing? They wouldn’t play with her and told her, “It’s your job to put away all the toys after we’ve played with them.” They even pushed her – to make sure she picked up everything, and put them away tidy.

With tears in her eyes, she waited to see if they would turn brown or black or even tan – for breaking God’s Laws, but, their skin remained white. This puzzled her because it seemed that once you were made holy and ‘white as snow’ – nothing you did would ever change you back – to being brown again .

One of the sisters laughed and said, “You need to bathe more and wash the brown dirt off your skin before you can play with us”. As she left their room snickering, she couldn’t understand why holy white people didn’t seem to know what ‘others’ had to do to become ‘white as snow’. She wiped away her tears and continued picking up all of their lovely toys. She looked around their comfortable room – at the silky bed covers and matching curtains, the lovely polished furniture and floors, and the soft plush carpets. Their closets were filled with plenty of clothes, pretty dresses and lovely shoes. With all of this, the little brown girl wondered, if it was easier to follow God’s Laws when you had everything you needed or ever wanted.

She wiggled in her pew seat and opened her eyes as she realised the minister was now preaching about a law Jesus gave his followers. “ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ (Matthew 22.37-39)

The preacher was saying that by loving others in the same way that we love ourselves proves that we love God with all we have – our heart, soul, and mind. This was something she could do. So, at that moment, the little brown girl chose in her heart to forgive the two little white girls who had made fun of her, pulled

her hair, took her ribbons, and refused to play with her. She even forgave them for saying she needed to bathe more to become 'white as snow'.

That day in her heart she felt that she understood what becoming 'white as snow' meant. She learnt that following God's Laws meant sharing and showing Jesus's love in your heart for others – the 'pure white snow' was on the inside – in your heart, and soul, and mind – because that's where God lived. On the way home from church that Sunday, she finally realised that her brown skin was forever. Because no matter how many times she bathed, she always remained a little brown girl, but she committed to God on that day that inside she would try to be 'white as snow'.

That night she prayed for Jesus to show the little white girls, that even though they looked like him, they didn't act like him. So, she fell asleep asking Jesus to always help her keep his law to love others. She knew then that throughout her life, she would be content to act like Jesus, even if she didn't look like him.

To know God's Laws in our hearts and habitually follow them means following Jesus' welcoming example. Not simply in the words that we speak, but the actions we take, and the welcoming environment we create in our homes, churches, offices and classrooms. What we sometimes miss are those unspoken 'laws' in our churches, which reinforce who we are, how we look, and how even how we imagine the saints, angels, and Jesus Christ looked. It is as if these images are essential to secure us in our faith that to be Christian or Christ-like means to look like us. Perhaps this is why God forbids images or likenesses being formed of or attributed to Him – because He is and always will be – universally, the God of all.

Are we sending messages to visitors, our congregations, children, friends and neighbours that holiness is equated with whiteness? If true, then we must ask ourselves what that message says to those who try as they may – they will never succeed in acquiring Caucasian features or attributes like white skin, straight blonde hair, and blue eyes? Or, those whose accent may differ, or their way of dressing may indicate another cultural heritage.

In and of itself, having Caucasian features or characteristics are not bad or evil – because, all of God's human creation is good. But, I wonder if we might also be limiting God to our human-ness when these images and characteristics are made prevalent or normative. This is when they begin to represent or set the standard of membership, belonging and serving and can become most hurtful. Even, at times our anglicised worship traditions – the songs and hymns we sing, or its musical accompaniment – can become standardised in such a way that it excludes and stifles the gifts and talents others.

Often, the smallest of changes can ensure that we do not lose out on the rich beauty and diversity of God's coming kingdom and the expansiveness of His being – universally, the God of all.

Sing praise to the Lord, O Jerusalem; praise your God, O Zion; ¹⁴ For he has strengthened the bars of your gates and has blest your children within you. Alleluia!

