

Pentecost 21
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Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 20:1 – 4, 7 – 9, 12 – 209 – 31

Psalm 19:7 – 14

Philippians 3:4b – 14

Matthew 21:33 – 46

How are we to treat the Ten Commandments?

The supposed negativity of the Ten Commandments is being promoted at the moment, not for the purpose of understanding them better, but for advancing another agenda, which is to step out of the ancient traditions that have nurtured the church, the synagogue and the mosque and make way for the birth of a new faith. This context and the first reading set for today gives us an opportunity to reflect on how we might approach the Ten Commandments as part of our heritage of faith.

You will notice on the graphic for today the tablets carried by Moses are blank. Listen carefully because at the end of the service we'll pass around pencils so you can write in the spaces your own set of positive commandments!

The challenge of our time is to give the Ten Commandments their real worth without reducing them a form of moralism, or making them into a legalistic burden. To meet this challenge one thing that will help is if we have a firm grasp of the context in which the commandments appear.

The way the books of the Bible come to us tells a story. This year our readings have led us sequentially through Genesis and Exodus and have steadily exposed us to the foundational narratives of our faith. From this we can see the Commandments are given long after Abraham and Sarah worshiped and went out in response to God's call. We have seen how their descendants continued to live in an unfolding relationship with God that was gifted with promise and life, but without a set of rules. We have listened to the call of Moses and celebrated the deliverance of the people. Now, at this high point, well into the story, the Ten Commandments are given. To God's gifts of worship, life and freedom Law is added.

The introduction of law seems negative and restrictive, but that is because our feelings are coloured by our experience of civil law. The Hebrew idea, as reflected in Psalm 19, was that the law is a gift of God. Like wisdom, law reveals God, brings life to the soul and is of the very being and essence of creation. The Psalmist rejoices in the Law because it enabled humans to live according to the sort of balance in life that God intended. Understood this way Biblical law is not a restrictive device aimed at controlling human freedom. It provides a foundation for reciprocity between God and us, and between one another.

All of this is implied in the prologue to the Commandments. They should never be read without the words: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery...". The prologue distinguishes the commandments from any similar set of laws that may have existed in the region at the

time. This is God's direct address to the people. It stands first and gives what follows a theological context. In the wilderness, where Israel was learning to how live a new life of freedom, the prologue makes it clear the one who stands first in their life, whom they are called to worship and embrace is I AM, the God who called Moses. This is not a "god-in-general" type of deity, but the merciful one who heard their cry and set them free.

The laws that follow are not judicial requirements. They do not refer to the Courts or the consequences of transgression, and they are not intended to be another form of bondage. They are given in order to preserve the relationship with God, to protect freedom, and maintain the health of community life.

The Commandments are worded negatively, but they implicitly commend their positive side, which is not simply to avoid crimes. They open up life rather than close it down. They focus on the outer limits of conduct, in which God, nature and community are linked in harmony. They do not concentrate on minute aspects of behaviour, such as personal hygiene or self-care, and many modern evils are not covered. At one level the Commandments can be compared with a Bill of Rights, which establishes centres of concern that are open to further application through reflection. For example, Weapons of Mass Destruction are not mentioned. This does not mean we should delete "you shalt not kill" as irrelevant in today's world. Rather, we might think through how, in order to protect society from senseless killing, the world might work to abolish the production of such weapons. So we might continue to reflect on what it means to avoid bearing false witness, to refrain from stealing or coveting the possessions of another, and what it means to live, respecting those who gave us life.

At a stage in life when Israel had no structure to go on God's gift of the Commandments provided a means through which the people could demonstrate their YES to God's gift of freedom, through lives that honoured God and sought to protect community life.

The age-old problem with the Commandments is they can be used moralistically or as a basis for pedantic legalism that provides a way of building ourselves up in the eyes of God, usually at the expense of others. The New Testament has much to say about such mistaken approaches to the Law, which abrogates its central purpose.

From a New Testament perspective Christians are not exempt from the provisions of the Commandments. Jesus reminded the rich man of the Great Commandments: "love God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength, and your neighbour as our self". And in the New Commandment he brought this wisdom to a deeper expression when he said: "love one-another *as I have loved you*".

From a New Testament perspective everything in relation to the Commandments comes to its fulfilment in Jesus' cross and resurrection. Christ is the one in whom God says to us: "you are loved". That means Jesus' "as I have loved you" is a statement that could be thought of as parallel to the prologue to the Commandments. It tells us who God is for us: the merciful one, who in Christ undertook a new journey amongst us, called us to live in communion with his Spirit, renewed the faith of doubting disciples, and overtook Paul the persecutor and revolutionized his life.

“As I have loved you” declares that the way of divine being in the world is to actively seek the good of the faith and life of others. And the way of divine being is also to call those whose lives it touches to live according to that same pattern of active, self-giving love we have been shown in Christ.

If at this point we gathered up our thoughts to write on Moses’ tablets we could say: In Christ we are loved by God. In Christ we are called to allow our lives to be shaped by his active, self-giving in love for others.

If we did write that, we would not have moved beyond the spirit of the Ten Commandments. And we would have said nothing negative at all!