

Pentecost 18
8/10/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20
Psalm 19
Matthew 21:33-46

Commandments

Sermon preached by Rev. Em. Prof. Robert Gribben

Today, the lectionary places in front of us the Ten Commandments. In an era when all law seems to be under challenge, from the law regarding marriage, to gun laws to the laws of ethnic minorities in Spain – and here. And challenging law is legitimate. After all, the Basis of Union of the UCA says,

The Uniting Church will keep its law under constant review so that its life may be increasingly directed to the service of God and humanity, and its worship to a true and faithful setting forth of, and response to, the Gospel of Christ.

That is a noble sentiment with noble ends. The ‘service of God and humanity’ is something we do well in the Uniting Church, and here ‘law’ does not mean endlessly tinkering with regulations. But the interesting part is that it mentions ‘worship’ - law as it keeps our worship a ‘true and faithful setting forth’ of the Gospel. Few people realise how important that law is, or that it is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain.

If church law rapidly descends into regulations, worship laws soon focus on rubrics – the directions of how to do it. Perhaps that’s because people find small things easier to deal with, but they will soon lose hold on the Big Picture. The Big Picture is that we gather, not primarily for human fellowship, but to worship God. Interestingly, the *Basis* says very little about that, but it does name the centralities. It describes Word and Sacrament in dynamic terms, not theoretical ones. It doesn’t get into centuries of arguments stemming from Reformation disputes over what has been called the ‘Supper strife’. And in any case, we have the two editions of *Uniting in Worship* to guide us.

Trinity College asked me if I would help teach ‘Prayer Book Studies’ this semester. It’s been an interesting experience. For three centuries Anglican worship was characterised by the use of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*. For three centuries, Presbyterians and Congregationalists have defined themselves over against it. I remind you that 1661 was the year that the King – Charles II Stuart – returned to the throne after a couple of decades marked by civil war – the worst kind of all war – and Cromwell’s experiment at a republic, the Commonwealth. Whatever you think of Cromwell, it was a bold vision, but it failed. What it did was to bring all the Puritans – our forebears - outside the Church of England where we could be seen. With the return of King and Bishops, we were exposed as the enemy. King Charles *did* have to restore order, but he did it with an Act of *Uniformity* and by imposing a Book of – literally - Common Prayer on all subjects. Folk memory is a powerful thing, and it explains why our church traditions are so opposed to liturgical books, to bishops, and to uniformity. There were no alternative ways of legally being an English Christian. Over two thousand clergy lost their livings, including my personal hero Richard Baxter, a Presbyterian, and both grandfathers of the Wesleys. Why? Because they agreed

either to use, without change, the BCP, or they claimed liberty in worship and paid for it. On that date, two new traditions were born: Anglicanism was invented, and Nonconformity defined – by law.

Of course, things are very different today. If in the 17th century we had been presented with *A Prayer Book for Australia* (1995), there would have been no crisis of conscience, and no divided church. Even the liturgical laws the Anglican church has, have their counterpart in our authorized worship books. They are slightly more insistent on priests using the prayers laid down in the book, but they already represent a variety.

But we are all now facing a common challenge. Ever since Anglicans began translating the BCP into the languages of their former colonies, there has been no uniformity, because languages express ideas differently. Think how different Tudor English is to us today. But we are all affected by two further, connected, revolutionary inventions – the computer (with the internet) and the photocopier. My first liturgical experiments were facilitated by a very grumpy greasy Gestetner (remember?). The writing of liturgies and sermons, the choice of music, the use of images, are all now immeasurably assisted and expanded, and we are grateful for it.

But now it is possible – and a fact – that any worship leader can find any prayer anywhere on the internet, from any theological tradition or none, and copy it, and edit it, as s/he drops it into the Sunday leaflet of the congregation. Uniformity is inconceivable. But what of the faith of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church? What of the *integrity* of a Uniting Church or an Anglican one? What makes our worship the faithful inheritor of what our forebears fought to retain? What makes it *Christian*?

Many of my former students quote back to me a remark I often made; ‘In liturgy, there are no laws’ and I did say it. That’s partly because there was a consensus, a deposit of faith, doctrine and liturgical customs which could be trusted to express worship which carried the worshippers’ consent. We have been blessed in this congregation by a series of pastors with very great ability to articulate the faith and to create the texts and acts of worship for our use. We may trust Craig Thompson, but what about his successor?

My ‘no laws’ quip is unpacked by an article one of my teachers wrote, which he headed, ‘You are free – if...’ If you know what a liturgy of baptism is intended to achieve, you are free to draw together the resources you need (always remembering that congregational assent). The same for a marriage, or a Christian funeral, or a service of lament for a broken world. You could say that the whole of *Uniting in Worship* consists in providing *models* which our leaders are trusted to use or adapt. It stands in the tradition of the first Nonconformist *Directory of Public Worship* in 1644 – not a required book of common prayer. How many of our present ministers own or consult a UiW?

There is in fact one liturgical law, and it is more of an observation. *Lex orandi lex credendi*, which in its efficient Latin means, ‘The way we pray determines what we believe’. Not the particular words, but *what we do in worship* sets the pattern of what we believe.

So the fact that we do Word + Sacrament every Lord’s Day here, already speaks volumes about who we are. We hear the scriptures in an orderly way (lectionary) and we break bread as the body of Christ, and we sing all those responses. That we praise the Triune God in hymns and songs, and pray prayers of confession and hear words of assurance, and prayers of intercession, keeping our ears open to the cries of the suffering and needy of the world,

adds up to a book of practical theology. The pattern is our tutor, our connection with something deeper. True, *it is very fragile indeed*, but so is faith in a crucified God.

Our foundations are there, but they are also being undermined in this increasingly dominant secularist and selfish culture. I don't think we have begun to address the deeper questions of our futurity.

This may not be a biblical sermon, but it is a 'church' sermon, for it concerns us all – and let me end by showing a connection.

The Ten Commandments have a long history of us in Christian worship, but their very presence raises questions. I don't just mean the ones that are daily broken across our present sad humanity. I mean the laws themselves. How do we use them in worship? Thomas Cranmer, the composer of the Common Prayer, set the Commandments to be read before a prayer of confession, the law as *a canon to judge ourselves by*; Calvin placed them after the Assurance of Forgiveness, the law as *a guide to right living*. You need not choose between them! Ancient patterns still have creative things to say to us.
