

Pentecost 14
26/8/2018

Mark the Evangelist

Deuteronomy 5:1-6
Psalm 19
Matthew 5:17-20

Ten Commandments
Old Prescriptions in a Culture without Purpose

Sermon preached by Rev. Bruce Barber

Confusing one's own state of mind with the state of the world is one of the professional hazards of a certain sort of preacher. However, one is not alone today in asserting that, together with other Western cultures, we inhabit a world dedicated to a flight from truth. Some characteristic marks of cultures in decline are these: an ideology of relativism with regard to all claims for truth; inward self-protection from a questioning of the socially approved status quo; a secular religion which worships choice above everything; the cultivation of detachment from ultimate claims.

Why then bother with commandments from a world long gone?

Deuteronomy 5:6: *"Then God spoke all these words: 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.....'*

More than one hundred years ago, the British novelist and poet, Rudyard Kipling wrote these lines:

"Ship me somewhere east of Suez where the best is like the worst, where there ain't no ten commandments an' a man can raise a thirst".

Kipling's implication is that west of Suez, that is, in what we then called Christendom, there was no getting away from the Ten Commandments. Culturally, if not geographically, Australians, too, have been very much "west of Suez". Then, if not now, nearly everyone throughout the Empire knew about the Ten Commandments, and a great many people could recite them by heart. They were included and explained in Church catechisms taught to children; they were read at the beginning of every communion service. And not only were they impressed on the ear, but also the eye as well. Many were the Churches in which the Ten Commandments looked everyone in the face as they sat in the pews. So it is that until about seventy years ago it was impossible for churchgoers to be ignorant of them, and even non-churchgoers who rejected Christian doctrine would largely not have dreamt of rejecting their moral claims, at least in theory if not always in practice.

Not so today. Even influential clerics pour scorn on them. Their purported irrelevance, and their virtual eclipse, is undoubtedly due to the increasing secularisation of our society, whereby everything to do with "religion" has been banished to the domain of a private experience. Another reason, perhaps more alive in intentional Christian circles, is the idea that "the law of Moses" has been superseded by "the law of Christ". And there is truth in this claim. A well-known saying of Martin Luther that "each Christian must write one's own ten commandments" has been understood to mean that Christians

are free to substitute for those long received more or less what they like, whereas Luther actually meant that Christians are free to hear the commandments as *gospel* rather than cold, external law. In other words, Christians are *free* to obey the commandments rather than knowing themselves *required* to obey them.

It is indeed unfortunate that the Ten Commandments have come to be associated with the English word “law”, with its many meanings. If we use the word “law” in Christian language we should understand law as the Bible does, not as our judicial systems do. The word “law” has traditionally been the English word employed to translate the Hebrew word *Torah*, but *Torah* means the first five books of the Old Testament, not simply these ten commandments. The original meaning of “Torah” then is not so much “law” as it is “instruction”. *Torah* really stands for the whole revelation of God - all that has made known the nature, character and purpose of God as the basis for what as a consequence we must be and do.

This is clear from the introduction to the Ten Commandments as we encounter them in this fifth chapter in the Book of Deuteronomy: “*The Lord our God made a covenant with us in Horeb....*” (Chapter 5: 2). We then go on to hear how this covenant, although made with a significantly earlier generation of the Hebrews, is still being made effective “*with us who are all of us here alive this day*” (v.3). The substance of this covenantal promise is then given in the preface to the Ten Commandments: “*I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the Land of Egypt and of the House of Bondage*” (v.6). It is to this covenantal reality that the law is then unfolded in the shape of the Ten Commandments.

Although not present in the Hebrew text, the consequential sense for all the ten that follow this introduction is an implied: ‘*Therefore...*’. For this reason, on each occasion in the future that we make our way attempting to mine the import of these ten injunctions, we must as a reminder insert this crucial word *therefore* between the promise and the command. The point is that everything that can go wrong will go wrong when this introduction is passed over as if it has no interpretive force. To detach the commandments from their grounding in this event of deliverance, which is how they are inevitably heard today, is guaranteed to lead to a devastating misunderstanding. They are then required to stand without any context in all their forbidding starkness.

Of course, it is only common sense to grasp that for the protection of common life any society must abide by a set of agreed rules. In this respect there is nothing novel about the latter half of the table of the commandments, which can be found in similar form in the law code of the Babylonian king Hammurabi, at least six centuries before Israel’s founding. But there they stand without this liberating introduction before us today. Everything, then, hinges on its force: “*I am the Lord your God, who brought you out*”

The fact is that the commandments exist to make clear to the people of Israel exactly what is involved in the covenant, and to maintain that relationship of God with his people. Through the commandments, a practice is appointed for a way of life for Israel different from that of any other people on earth. In other words, Israel’s God does not intend to leave this people to follow its own devices, nor to work out its own destiny.

This foundation to the giving of “the Law” has not been readily understood by us, and it certainly wasn’t understood by the people of Israel. Time and again, we hear how they gave themselves to ever new and more grievous forms of slavery than that which they had left in Egypt, that living symbol of the despots by which people then, as now, are enslaved. The commandments, therefore, are ingredient in the promise of the Covenant

for Israel, and in turn for us: that the God, who calls a representative people into being, has left neither nations nor individuals in a state of bondage, or of hopeless moral confusion.

Indeed we can go further and embrace these commandments as our best protection against all the unjust commandments that might be foisted upon us by unscrupulous manipulators, by despotic governments, by insidious media pressure groups of all persuasions who seek to control the lives of others for their own purposes. On the strength of these commandments we can say “No” both to the unruly passions and desires that seek to tyrannise over us from within, and to all dictators who seek to tyrannise us from without.

If this understanding of the commandments is news to some people, then it must surely be “good news”. To say again: to wrench the Ten Commandments out of their context, leaving them standing only in their cold authoritarian isolation, is completely to miss the point. It means that they will inevitably become graceless, and therefore destructive, because they will lead either to pride or despair. And then, probably at the same time, they will serve as instruments of silent judgement over others.

The truth is this. At no time does God ever intend that law without grace be a means of salvation for people. This must be one of the hardest conclusions for serious and sensitive human beings to accept. We have so often been told, and thereby assumed, that by trying harder, by erecting more and more safeguards against the infringement of the law, there is still hope for us. But this is the ancient heresy of Pharisaism, though it is not at all peculiar to the Pharisees.

Pharisees are simply the representatives of all forms of religious and moral legalism. Not until it sinks in how extraordinarily *good* the Pharisees were - and they are usually made out to be unpleasant - will we appreciate the difference between the hopeless justification that they represent on the one hand, and, on the other, a hopeful justification for all.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says: “*Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees you shall never enter the kingdom of heaven*” (Matthew 5:17-20). How revolutionary is that judgement. “Exceed” here means not “more of the same”, but the need to run on quite different tracks. Only by such a fundamental diversion will the promise of the Sermon be realised: “*I have not come to abolish the law and the prophets, I have come to fulfil them*”. And what a fulfilment! For here is the old commandment made flesh. Here in dramatic concreteness is the law rightly lived, Here we find each commandment - inevitably in every generation either rejected or fired as a constrictive weapon - now beautifully and graciously embodied and lived. Here is One whose being from beginning to end is marked by the law. Born under the law, he lived and taught under the law, and was crucified under the law ostensibly for the sake of obedience to the covenant between God and Israel. And it is by this perfect obedience that he shows the meaning of the fulfilment of the law, and therefore the meaning of life. As the apostle Paul confirms: in Christ all the commandments of God are fulfilled as a resounding “Yes”.

As we approach each of these Ten Commandments in turn, it is in this graceful grounding that their meaning and fulfilment is to be found. To this end, we note how the Gospel of Matthew announces that Jesus teaches the Sermon on the Mount only to his disciples. Just as Yahweh of old calls his people out of the bondage of Egypt to the life of promise and destiny of which the commandments are sign, so the new “Israel” here is

called on another mountain by a new Moses - called out of the bondage of the religious law to a life where the law becomes grace, active, fruitful, life giving.

But let us not overlook this. The sermon is uttered in the presence of the crowd. The point of this scenario is to make clear that literally any apparent outsider is free at any time to become a disciple. This should not be a surprise. Even before Moses and this covenantal pledge introducing the commandments, Abraham was promised a similar outcome: that through his obedience “all the nations of the earth will bless themselves”. The point is that the covenants, old and new, with their accompanying commandments, are for the sake of a world blessed. God and the world, here as everywhere, always belong together.

May it be so for our day too. Embraced by this promise, we will then find ourselves properly prepared to embark on this tenfold journey of freedom to a promised land.
