

Easter 7
2/6/2019

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 4:1-9

Psalm 71

Hebrews 12:18-19; 22-24

Matthew 5:21-22

The Sixth Commandment

Sermon preached by Rev. Bruce Barber

“I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of slavery, (therefore)....”
“You shall not kill”

To this point the commandments might easily be heard as if they had relevance only for a special people. However, it is crucial to take account of the fact that from the very beginning the whole of creation is embraced in principle in the particular status which the Hebrew people enjoy. As early as the call of Abraham we hear that “in you *all the families of the earth* shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). Therefore, assumptions like the slick couplet: “How odd of God to choose the Jews”, is only half the story. This apparently exclusive election actually anticipates that the blessing which Israel is called to embody will be *universally* celebrated. To this end, obedience of the commandments offers the promise: that the Gentiles are indeed destined to *come* to the light. In other words, the very *existence* of this chosen people is the mandate for their mission. They don’t have to do anything else but to *live* the covenantal promise as light to the world. Easily said, of course, given the way their history went, as does ours. If we wonder what mission means for churches today, here is a powerful precedent. The decisive matter is simply that if all of these commandments were to be obeyed, then the whole creation would receive new life.

This is the context for this sixth commandment: “*You shall not kill*”, which more accurately reads: “*You shall not murder*”. The distinction is important. It reminds us that the commandment is directed in the first place against violent, unauthorised killing. It forbids people from taking matters into their own hands, remembering that at the same time the law of Moses did provide elsewhere for both capital punishment and war. Military conflict between the nations, for example, often had as its object defence against an intolerable threat to human life.

Those who delight in taking a scalpel to the Bible observe this apparent inconsistency that the killing of people is not only reported in the Old Testament, but occurs often without any objection; indeed, it may even happen in specific instances in obedience to the command of God. But it is equally clear that such apparently justified killing is an exception. It occurs only within the wider judgement of God penetrating human history and society. It is never something which can be contemplated in the spirit of human revenge.

We might readily conclude that all of this is really of little help in giving a clear answer to the enormously difficult ethical questions that confront us in such a changed social and religious situation. The distinction between killing and murder seems to be only of historical interest. It remains relevant, to be sure, for those who are tempted to take physical vengeance into their own hands, and for thugs who go about with flick knives

or who carry shotguns in their cars to be fired off when the whim takes them. But most of us do not find this to be a real temptation to be overcome.

Much more pertinent in the recent past were the distressing and perplexing questions that confronted our society, and still remain in force in others, such as the conflicts about capital punishment, or the legitimacy or not of taking up arms in time of war. More specifically, in our own day the commandment has a bearing on two fundamental issues having to do with the beginning and end of life: abortion on demand, and assisted dying. It is telling to note the euphemistic language frequently employed when each is the subject of debate. Such new-speak suggests an awareness that there are darker realities hidden below the surface that require to be sanitised. Nevertheless, it would be foolish to disregard appropriate guidance in particular instances from qualified experts, perhaps as a first word, if not as the last. But these considerations are quite other than what is surely inconceivable from the standpoint of this commandment – the unrelenting shrill demand that “My body is my own”. One cannot imagine any clearer illustration of the death of God in our culture than this dogmatic assertion. The truth is that this commandment cannot have any future wherever the culture insists in principle that in any action bearing on the preservation, or yielding, of life, anything more than my individual decision needs to be considered.

But where a society still feels the need for such a commandment prohibiting killing, we might reflect on the fact that what is at stake here comes as a *commandment*.

“*You shall not kill*” is quite specifically a *command* of the God confessed to be the creator of life. This means that it is not a piece of human wisdom which human beings may feel free to modify according to inclination or prevailing circumstances. What’s more, because the prohibition against killing is understood to be a commandment of *God*, it follows that God is not to be made subject to his own law. That is to say, the commandment is not greater than the one who gives it. Since it is God, and not human beings, who is the creator and preserver of life, it follows that human life is not a kind of “second” god. This means that the commanded protection of life may conceivably in extreme circumstances consist in its surrender and sacrifice.

This was the agonising decision which dissenting Christians involved in the plot against Hitler in Nazi Germany had to wrestle with. *In order to keep faith with the commandment, they had to break it in this literal specific case*. The “many” prevailed over the “one” in order to honour the preservation of larger life. As practising Christians, those involved knew that human life is *not* sacred in and of itself. They came to do what they did, not out of some expedient disobedience of the commandment, but in obedience to a more immediate and costly word.

Which helps us as we come to the Gospel today. Here, the focus of the commandment is disconcertingly concentrated, potentially nailing each and every-one of us to the ground. We are confronted by its radical expansion: “*You have heard that it was said to the people of old ‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgement’. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with brother or sister shall be liable to judgement ...*” (Matthew 5:21-22).

It is significant that Jesus does not speak against killing as such, but rather *radicalises* the concept of murder: whoever is angry with another, and calls him or her a fool, incurs the judgement of the commandment in the same way as the one who in the simple sense of the term wilfully takes the life of another. Who can claim to be guiltless in the face of this expansion?

For most of us, the murderer is suppressed or chained, whether by the command of God, or by convention, circumstances, or fear of punishment. Yet if it is *anger* that is the ultimate problem, then the killer is very much alive in the cage, ready to leap out at any time. After all, Cain as we heard, was not an especially depraved type, but simply a man living in the heart of an ordinary family. What marks the difference between Cain and Abel is that Cain is not reconciled to God; he is, we might say, *theologically* unreconciled. And it is *this* anger that transfers to Abel, and so gives rise to murder. The point is that - incomprehensible though it be for contemporary society to grasp - anger is ultimately a theological problem.

Which explains why it is in the midst of this angry and murderous world, in which both God and humans are implicated, that a word of life and resurrection has been spoken, precisely by the Murdered One, "*whose sprinkled blood, as we heard in the Epistle, speaks a better word than the blood of Abel*". The sprinkled blood of both was shed, not by "killer types", but by ordinary people like ourselves. Perhaps it all comes to rest in the simple question of the black American spiritual: "*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*"

In the light of Jesus' expansion of the ancient commandment, and of which his fate is deadly illustration, must we not give an answer like this to that simple but penetrating question: "*I was there, and I still am*".

And if this be so, then the conclusion is surely inescapable.

It becomes impossible to imagine ourselves saying: "'You shall not kill' is at least one commandment I'm not tempted to break".
