

Pentecost 5
14/7/2019

Mark the Evangelist

Hosea 4:1-3, 7-10

Psalm 51

Ephesians 5:21, 28-33

Mark 8:34-38

The Seventh 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 commit adultery”*

In our journey through the commandments it is worth recalling the way we have come. The first four, or perhaps five, commandments have to do with the being and character of the God of Israel. The promise: *“I shall be your God; you shall be my people”* inevitably implies how the covenant people are to live. That is what we have already heard in the demands of the previous commandments: what it is to have no other gods; to reject an idol; to honour the name of the Lord; to remember the Sabbath day; not to kill. That is to say, what is significant about the commandments is not merely their individual focus. The reason *why* each is to be obeyed is because the *identity* of the God of the covenant has first of all been established.

Therefore, each commandment illustrates the offer of a genuine freedom guaranteed by the covenant, not a new bondage. To isolate these commandments from this covenantal basis would be to make them into mere arbitrary assertions as to how people should behave. The fact that as a cold legalism this is how such injunctions are invariably understood readily gives rise to counter claims and contrary opinions, such as: “This commandment once made sense, but really not now in the modern world”.

To be specific, and given the inescapability of human sexuality, this seventh commandment concerning adultery appears to be one historically honoured as much in the breach as in the observance, and certainly no less in our day. Some weeks ago, an article appeared in *The Age*, by of all people a female Jewish rabbi, encouraging the potential value of a little bit of adultery. Although the article concluded by asking for reader response, there was none. What does that silence signify? Presumably that the matter is of no real consequence to the wider society. Why, then, persevere with our undertaking? One answer is that only if we can provide compelling *reasons* for taking account of anything that looks like a commandment is it conceivable that such considerations might gain a hearing in the contemporary climate.

To this end, each of the readings charts a profitable course for us to take. Hosea makes clear that moral confusion and disobedience in his day arise through religious apostasy. Because Israel has become faithless, there is no knowledge of Yahweh in the land. Despite his constancy, the people play the harlot in the attempt to forestall anarchy by making gods of the forces of nature. As night follows day, who the god is determines what the worshipper performs. In that religious culture, cultic prostitution existed in order to encourage the “gods” to be equally fertile by bringing rain, without which all is lost. For this reason, the commandment against adultery has real force in demonstrating the difference between Yahweh and the fertilising rain god Baal. When the prophets, as

does Hosea, chastise the people for “*whoring after false gods*”, they use the word adultery because in that religiously pluralistic world loyalty to the one God is diluted, or *adulterated*. Again, and again the prophets show us how hard is the fight between the pure worship of Yahweh and the fertility rites of Baal and Ashtoreth, and of how idolatry and sexual license go together. For example, Jezebel, Ahab’s queen, is treated as “a whore” for no other reason than that she introduced the worship of Baal into northern Israel. So, we are certain to miss the point if we restrict the matter of adultery merely to that of sexuality.

It is in this sense that eight centuries later Jesus describes the actual situation in which the world finds itself as an “*evil and adulterous generation*” seeking some sign. This description helps us to understand that adultery in the Bible refers in the first place more to *theological* irregularity than it does to sexual.

It is perhaps not made sufficiently clear that the word adultery is derived from the same root as the word “adulteration”. The word refers to corruption through association with an alien source – not the comedian’s play for laughs that adultery is associated with adults as infancy is with infants. Adultery always has to do with *adulteration*, with a breach of loyalty. That is why there is such a close connection between who God is understood to be, and what people believe is open to them in their dealings one with another.

But the difference between that world and our own is now considerable. Whereas the ancient texts link the religious and the sexual, we now live in the secularised Western world, where the self and its own future is detached from any redemptive context, and where religion is increasingly held in quiet or strident contempt. Because relationships become self-constructions, and because they are all we have, literally everything is expected of them.

In the final analysis, given the logic of the repudiation of the covenantal foundation of the commandment in favour of self-determination, the risk of adultery has to be inevitable. With nothing to qualify the self, Jesus’ description of his own day as “*an evil and adulterous generation seeking signs*” assumes some force in our own technologically predatory society. While the serious minded are likely to espouse practical, if not theoretical serial monogamy, for many all that is left it seems is the frequently experienced insecurity, anxiety, and loneliness of the always at hand on-line search for the elusive encouraging “sign”.

Where God is not, compensatory “sign seeking” reveals how serious is the misunderstanding to think that today we are liberated from the ancient connection between human sexuality and faith in the God of the covenant. But it is not just a case of their *mutuality*. It is *how* that mutuality is understood. In this respect, and with regard to marriage, Paul is saying something that otherwise would be exceedingly odd – that is, he makes marriage dependent on the love that Christ has for the church. Who would have thought that it is the Gospel that actually *constitutes* a marriage? That is to say, that the covenant of the *natural* – the relationship between husband and wife – is made *dependent* on the covenant of *grace*, the love that the Lord has for his church.

Once rooted in the Western tradition, secular society no longer understands this reversal, if indeed it ever did. It is not simply that marriage is able to be dismissed as “only a piece of paper”. It is that even if any connection at all is made between marriage and God, invariably it is to reverse this priority, and to make what the culture vacuously calls “religion” secondary to natural instinct. The problem is compounded when, as the increasingly hostile letters to the daily press reveal, it is apparent that the culture

believes that “religion” should only be about religion, and not anything to do with the actual *substance* of what it means to be a human being. “Religion” thereby becomes merely a form of therapy if, or when, things go wrong, but only if one happens to be so inclined.

Inevitably, the culture must be incredulous of Paul’s insistence that it is Christ’s love for the Church that constitutes marriage. Perhaps we share that incredulity. Not surprisingly, therefore, where marriages are in difficulty it is as much likely to be due to an inadequate theology as to some manifestation of human incompatibility. What secular marriage guidance course helps rectify that? Is not the human condition to expect far too much of each other and ourselves in matters where we should not really expect much at all? And on the other hand, where we have every right to expect the gifts of God, just here in relation to human commitment, that we seldom seek them even if we knew that we can and should.

The Easter gospel of the vindication of the crucified One declares that this commandment has been so believed, and, consequently, has been truly lived in unadulterated faithfulness, even to death. This is what we affirm when the liturgy invites us to confess the faith of the Church, for example in the Nicene Creed, when we say “*for us and for our salvation*”. And since this “us” of salvation is both public and universal in its scope, the commandment, too, has now become public truth, not just a private ethic for Jews and Christians.

In other words, continuing to live as do the people of the covenant in “an evil and adulterous generation”, the command: “*You shall not commit adultery*” has now become not only possible in principle, but actually achievable in practice. And that has to be good news.
