

**Pentecost 9**  
**11/8/2019**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**1 Kings 21:1-19**

**Psalm 13**

**Acts 4:32-37**

**Matthew 21:12-13**

**The Eighth Commandment**

Sermon preached by Rev. Bruce Barber

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*"I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of slavery, (therefore)....  
You shall not steal*

What can one say about stealing except to offer moralistic commonplaces?

Perhaps just this, and it is really the only thing that we need to hear: what is new about the commandment is that it understands: *"You shall not steal"* – an injunction as old as civilisation itself – now to be heard as a requirement of divine justice, not of worldly expediency. We seldom, even as Christians, get much beyond worldly expediency when moral questions are at stake. So, it is a good thing to be reminded that the commandment is about something much more significant than "stealing is wrong" or that "crime doesn't pay". At a much more profound level, exodus from Egyptian slavery is not to be the occasion for assisting the deprivation of others. This why "not stealing" is about the justice of God.

No better illustration of such condemnation is to be heard, and no crime is more condemned, than the famous parable of Naboth's vineyard in which Queen Jezebel both murdered Naboth, and then confiscated his vineyard. In similar fashion, this Hebrew teaching on the implications of theft reached its later culmination when Jesus overturned the money changers' tables. Frequently invoked by anti-pacifists, this story is somewhat more complicated than is often supposed. These tax collectors were respectable travelling temple officials responsible for raising a tax for the upkeep of the temple. The tax consisted of a half shekel to be paid in a particular currency, hence the need for moneychangers. The tax, which Jesus himself happily paid, was levied on all Jews over twenty. But now these officials had become secular opportunists, setting up shop in the Court of the Gentiles to which access was free. Not only were they inflating the going rate, they were effectively requiring an admission charge to the very temple presence of God. Stealing indeed!

As we have worked through the commandments, we have found ourselves confronted by a series of claims upon different aspects of the common life of the covenant people. We have seen that all the commandments aim at protecting God's image, either in its association with God himself, or in relation to its reflection for a sustainable human life. Each has claimed our obedience, service and witness in the midst of family life, through the intimate relationships of sexuality and marriage, and now the warning of the temptation of theft, primarily in the realm of economics, but suggestively open to wider extension. A moment's thought reveals that in a complex society stealing encompasses much more than the economic. Theft in various guises is, it seems, the perennial potential human condition. At the personal level, think of the experienced power of theft when expressed by innuendo, or worse, impugning of others their reputation, their

professional competence, or their social desirability. Or consider how the scope of modern electronic technology has given rise to what we call the theft of “intellectual capital”. Theft’s territory is legion, for it is many.

But clearly theft is most apparent in the realm of economics. “It’s the economy, stupid”, a sentence now made immortal by a President of the United States. As if illustrations from history are not replete enough, closer to home the last election confirmed that within the human heart there is a deep sense of aggrandisement, constantly on guard against personal diminution of wealth. As we well know, anxiety about possible loss invariably accompanies wealth, whether that wealth be static or increasing. In this respect, sociologists have taught us the phrase “upward mobility”. That clearly will have diverse connotations. When applied to middle class aspirations it will mean something quite different from its desired anticipation by the permanently constrained economic poor – whether at home or abroad.

The cliché, “nothing succeeds like success”, is grotesquely true with regard to money. It may be the case that while water left to itself always flows downwards, despite the political claim to the contrary, it seems that money always flows upwards to those who have it. The science of economics, and the practice of politics, may dispute the morality of this situation, but it appears to be an intractable problem.

It was against precisely this situation that the claim of this commandment had to be re-asserted time and again in the history of Israel. Prophet after prophet reminded the nation that the fact that such things should happen in the life of Israel contradicted everything required of the people of God. This eighth commandment, therefore, is primarily directed against the robbery of the poor by the rich. For modern society, it is, ironically, the other way around. Convention understands stealing to mean the robbery of the rich by the poor.

It is a sobering thought that while robbery is never condoned in the Bible, on page after page judgement is called down on the rich, who in far more subtle ways than house-breaking, take away the rights of the poor. An important present-day Old Testament scholar makes this summary comment of the then social mandate: *“The poor are to receive their rights not as a form of charitable hand-out, but as a fundamental means of preserving the life of the nation and most important for its safety. It is more important than large battalions and powerful allies that the nation should allow its weak and helpless members to share in the freedom and justice given them by the hand of God.”* This is said of a community which lived 3000 years ago. It could well be the social welfare policy of a political party today without changing one word, especially if it is heard as the charter to remedy the scandalous situation endured by asylum seekers. But all the more, now, spurred on by global instability, it is not merely a matter of economic distribution, but more insidiously, that of the possession or absence of natural resources, most specifically, soon to emerge, that of water. Climate change will ensure that water theft will prove to become a matter of justice without parallel, witness on our small local scene, the Murray/Darling basin fiasco.

But the most compelling reason why the concept of stealing is enlarged in the Bible is that the commandment is addressed to a people who have all equally shared in the redeeming love and purpose of God. Covenantal brothers and sisters have not been liberated from Egyptian bondage in order to lie starving and exposed.

Mindful that it is easy to preach a shortcut to Utopia through someone else’s property, how far is it possible in the midst of modern society to bring to bear the economic challenge we find encapsulated in this commandment? It is obvious that with our

modern economic structures we cannot go back to the ideal pattern of earlier days, not least to the remarkable situation which saw the cancellation of all debts every fifty years. But what of the Pentecostal experience?: “*All that believed were together and had all things in common and sold their possessions and goods and parted them to all as each had need*”. Far from being some form of primitive communism, here there is no compulsive law or theory behind this sharing of possessions and wealth. It is an affair of the heart, a generous outpouring in conformity to the outflowing redemptive generosity of that community by which the acquisitive tendency of the human heart has been strangely, suddenly, and decisively reversed, producing dramatic economic results.

Is this word describing a Christian community any longer a word capable of being addressed to the culture? It is surely a real, if not an entirely promising question, given society’s increasing and absurd demand that religion be merely a private matter. But were this to happen, there would be the beginning of a life lived in the power and light of this new order of things.

Today we really haven’t all that much choice in the matter. Global crises will ensure that we will need to learn as a matter of supreme urgency to obey this eighth commandment “*You shall not steal*”. Otherwise, we may conceivably arrive at that extreme condition in which the poor – whether they be near or far – having seen the commandment rejected by the affluent West, may find obedience to the *seventh* commandment: “*You shall not kill*” difficult to achieve. Who would have thought that there might be such an alarming connection between these two commandments?

But such is the realism, the urgency, and the warning attached to the command of the God of the covenantal promise: “*I have brought you out of the land of slavery, therefore.... You shall not steal*”.

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