

Pentecost 20
7/10/2018

Mark the Evangelist

1 Kings 19:7-13

Psalm 121

1 Corinthians 8:4-7b

Mark 12:28-31

The First 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 have no other gods before me.”

We live in a time in Western history of increasing atheism and anti-theism. So, it is a real question whether it is even possible to appreciate the urgent necessity of this text - either three thousand years ago, and, most of all, especially today. The irony is profound, since this commandment has been the foundation stone that has created the modern world - a world in which it is now possible to disavow that origin. Indeed, this commandment possesses a legitimate claim to being the most important discovery that has ever been made. Even in the face of every potentially new technological advance, we may dare to predict that it will remain the greatest discovery that will ever be made: *“I am the Lord your God”*. How may such an immoderate claim be sustained?

When it was first uttered, the world was in the grip of uncontrollable forces. The gods of the natural world were alive and well. Life was lived in the realm of a throbbing, pulsing kingdom, in the interplay of gigantic forces to which life must be attuned. In the storm one met the god storm. There was a god of the spring, a god of the harvest, a god for every human activity. Sometimes these gods were benign; sometimes they fought each other; most often they needed to be placated. It was a threatening world. At all times life was unpredictable in a way which, from this distance, we can scarcely comprehend.

Abruptly the scene changes; into this chaotic arena, into this world “dripping with divinity” an absurd “jester” appears. The role of jesters is to bring to public notice what is hidden or obscured. The jester’s message? Although it might look like a world of *“gods many and lords many”*, the truth is that the claim is false. Behind what everyone took for granted - a world of a multiplicity of divinities - this then absurd voice announces: one God claims total allegiance, the single source of all that is.

When we think ourselves back into that world with the force of this first commandment, a literally incredible new destiny immediately opened up. How successful this “fool” has been is witnessed to by the three great historic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. From the synagogues of the Jews; the minarets of Islam; the pulpits of Christendom, the voice has sounded loud and clear: receive the universe as the one creation of the one God. Without the conviction of this “fool”, we would not now be living in the much-vaunted secular society that we inhabit today; a world from which in principle all gods have been expunged.

When the first pilgrim people were born with this infant cry on its lips, when their faith in this God was awakened by the release from their Egyptian servitude into a real freedom, the gods of the natural world were irretrievably unmasked. They were shown to be nothing more than the silence which they had always been (1 Kings 19:11-13). This confession: *"I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods before me"* has undermined in principle and, wherever it has been understood, has continued to shatter all other religious pretensions.

This first Commandment, then, is the happiest of all the texts in the Bible, a liberation for all, in every time and in every place. Belief in this God destroyed the fetishes and the totems. For example, as we heard in the Psalm, no longer could it be said: *"I will lift up my eyes to the hills"* expecting there to discover the helping god. Rather, the confident confession resounds: No - not the sacred mountain, but: *"My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth"* (Psalm 121). How illusory is the god of the high places if Yahweh in truth be God - that "still small voice" which makes all things human; that power which brings into being what does not yet exist. In the place of every human religious construction, there is now initiated in Israel this name, *"the Lord your God"*, to be made known to the ends of the earth. This name will end a life bedevilled by fate and, in its place, what was previously an impossible concept - the word "purpose", signifying for the very first time the prospect of a meaningful life.

The profound consequences of this demolition continue to be far reaching. It is scarcely possible to exaggerate this revolutionary gift of the Hebrews' way of living in the world, declaring as it does their trust in the One God to be the *consequence* of a genuine emancipation from the bondages of their world. Contrast this with the virtually universal assumption of those who write sarcastic letters to *The Age* debunking faith in what they assume to be an imaginary God. Invariably they assume that "God" represents some theoretical *assumption*, some groundless presupposition for what a religion will then want to offer.

The fact is that this relocation of God talk from imprisoned nature to a promising history waits to effect its powerful liberation all over again: *"I am the Lord your God who brought you out...therefore"* In this respect, it is important to heed what is said of Frederick the Great, the nineteenth century King of Prussia, when he asked his chaplain for just one proof of God. The chaplain's reply was: "Sire, the Jews". We need to keep on saying this again and again, especially in a culture incredulous of locating the word "proof" with regard to God linked to the vagaries of this minority people. Moreover, to assure those who today are offended by the intractable Israeli/Palestinian conflict, the unequivocal declaration: "Sire, the Jews" serves equally as a reminder of a perhaps more honourable history embraced by the Jews.

There is an account of a Hasidic Rabbi who, on hearing this preface to the first commandment, was so overcome with ecstasy that he screamed and gesticulated so wildly that he had to be taken out of the gathering. What was it that caused such emotion? It was the implications of a profound revelation: *"And God said"*. Taken out, he continued to beat his hands against the wall continually crying aloud: *"And God said"; "And God said"; "And God said"*. Imagine that happening today in our churches, even as we register how utterly incomprehensible these three words would be in the larger society. That which once turned the world upside down, the message that the one God had made himself known through his name *"I am the Lord your God"*, has now become the meaningless inanity: *"O my god"*. So many people, so many gods!

Could it be that the old gods have returned in all their multiplicity? Obviously not, given that increasingly we live with a modern paganism which today takes its form not as the question of the One God against the many, but of the One against none at all. The pathos of the loss of the one God today is that many have arrived at this conclusion, not by some clear conviction, but as prisoners of cultural factors of which they are quite unaware. One feature of this development is that Christian faith now presents to an apparently increasing number of our Western contemporaries a face which is marked by an impenetrable silence. But silence implies a vacuum which, like all vacuums, inevitably will be filled. In a sense, then, new gods have arisen, and are knocking on our gates. They are present today in the form of a paganism which shows itself as the religion of *human* nature, whose deity is now “choice”, rather than that ancient imprisonment of the natural *world*, whose deity was “fate”.

Today, the rich variety of the human experience inevitably makes it possible that where and when the One is silent, we have no alternative but to accept the new clamouring conflictual “choices” after all. But when we think about it, this new god, “choice”, must surely be a mystifying concept - certainly to the billions living in the daily imprisonments and predictabilities of the non-Western world, but even mystifying to all but the last generation or two in Western society for whom choice was inevitably restricted by place, economics or education. By contrast, functioning as it does as *the* contemporary evangelical creed in a day when all religious creeds are anathema, “choice” may superficially be innocent enough. But like all constructed gods, “choice” conceals its dark side. For example, how many young people can be its unalloyed devotees confined as they are by little prospect of housing themselves, much less of secure employment? In any case, the demands of “choice” are insatiable, so that, sooner or later death by exhaustion, figuratively or literally, will surely emerge. Then it will become apparent that we are in a much more vulnerable position than our earlier ancestors.

We may be mildly amused, and certainly condescending of them - with their tangible idols and images and sacrifices and rituals. But when all is said and done, this must be acknowledged: they knew that they were not worshipping themselves. The fact is that without this preventive command of the one God, we face an insoluble dilemma. In a world that has become radically human, but which now as it flirts with developing artificial intelligence is in the process of rapidly becoming post-human, nothing else is able to transcend us, so that sooner or later a society will become prisoner both of its gods and its devils.

“*You shall have no other gods before me*”. If we hold to this word, the present loses its disorders and the future its terrors. The first Commandment is, in fact, the foundation of all life, of all joy, and of every resolution, not least because One who supremely embodied the Commandment, the redeemer Christ, stands for us and beside us to enable us to live by it. But this first Commandment does not merely offer itself to be the truth by which Jewish and Christian people learn always anew to identify themselves. Even more, especially in these convulsive days, it offers to the wider culture the true source of a happy future, even as that society celebrates its presumed secular emancipation from its illusory deity.

“I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of slavery”

(therefore)

“You shall have no other gods before me”.

Or, if we prefer, the surely contemporary words of the apostle Paul:

“For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth ...yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ - through whom are all things, and through whom -we exist”

(1 Corinthians 8:4-6).
