

Pentecost 21
14/10/2018

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 10:1-10
Psalm 115
Colossians 1:13-20
John 19:1-7

The Second 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 make for yourselves any carved image.” (Exodus 20:4)

The first commandment has already renounced the many gods, commanding trust in the one and only real God. This second commandment now stands as a preventive warning. A world of many gods must have statues or pictures to distinguish one god from another. But if God is indeed One, then the making of idols must inevitably be prohibited.

This commandment, then, is no incidental, idle, petulant whim of a primitive, tyrannous and jealous deity. On the contrary, this second commandment is the only safeguard and security of God being able to be God, and therefore the possibility that we might be truly human.

So, the second commandment prescribes the form or shape which faith is to take. It demands that we seek not images or pictures, but the very *being* of God: God *communicated* to us - not as an ultimately impotent *image*, but as living *word*. The difference is crucial. Words listened to and acted upon create new worlds; visible objects bring us to either a respectful or horrified halt in front of them. Of course, words certainly may become dead things, as Jesus was continually forced to impress on his Jewish contemporaries. Images, equally, are not immune from recording dead things. But the word of another is unique if there is to be a world of living personal communication - communion, in fact.

The people of God, therefore, are not so much enjoined to *see* the unseen God or his likeness, but to *hear* his word. And what is more, when God does present his image and likeness, it is seen to be at once identical with his word, which the New Testament sees incarnate in the man, Jesus of Nazareth, “*the image of the invisible God*” (Colossians 1:15).

As the first commandment implied, Israel's neighbours worshipped tangible images in holy places as the bearers of divinity, images carved as constructs of the way they thought about and understood the world in which they lived. For them, what happened to the images concerned the gods themselves. Priests washed and clothed and fed the image - a well-honoured image rewarded its faithful, an abandoned image avenged itself.

Israel was called to something quite other. The God of Israel allowed no image to be made. Why must there be no image from our side? Why such implacable hostility to images? Because in the image the sovereignty of God will inevitably be arrested, imprisoned, possessed and used. In the image, God will be forced to surrender.

Therefore, the anger of Yahweh - the sacred name which called Israel out of the nothingness of Egypt to a unique vocation - the anger of this invisible yet powerful presence fell on the one who worshipped an image or served it. The prohibition against images, therefore, is to safeguard the freedom of God, and thereby the freedom of the people.

Now, of course, the magical power of these old images no longer exists. Rather we have much more subtle images which are even more dangerous, so that the commandment is needed as much as it has ever been. Martin Luther is reported as having said of human beings that we are “idol making factories”. That rings true when over the subsequent millennia from the giving of the commandment we encounter the crude abstract images that human beings have foisted onto God; intended as warnings they may be, but nonetheless images of cruel judgement are merely extensions of the devising of human law courts, not to speak of images of eternal punishment in unending flames. No wonder that millions who once trembled before such a God, now in even greater millions, turn away in disgust. Or think of the equally contrived but much more sophisticated images. Perhaps the most notable is the fiction of what we call “the problem of evil”, for which God is made responsible: the assured popular assumption that God must be either all powerful or all good, but certainly not both at once. All these mental images of our own making are no less hopeless than the crude material constructs of the day of our text,

But image making is a truly comprehensive activity. It is not that we are simply prisoners of strictly projected God-centred images. What is true of God is equally true for us. If human beings are indeed made in the image of God, then we can feel the redemptive force of the commandment as it extends to our human situation too. Subject no longer to the manufactured *cultic* image influenced by magic, the corrosive image becomes newly manufactured - the pigeonhole, the slogan, the caricature, the cliché. All this has been true literally from the beginning of civilization. We all experience the power of generalised images to rob us of our humanity, infringing a freedom that inhibits our future. Confining choices always present themselves as mandatory, requiring that we fall in usually under twofold imperatives: everyone must be unrelentingly imprisoned by constructed ideologies - *reactionary or progressive; left or right; homophobic or inclusive*, to name but three powerful contemporary straightjackets. Or consider how a child who is branded as stupid is likely to be confirmed so in everyday life; or closer to home, how prevailing secularism increasingly assumes so-called “religious” people to be unintelligent. Should you believe this to an exaggeration, here is Alex Turnbull, the son of the former Liberal Prime Minister only days ago justifying to some public surprise a prospective vote for Labor at the forthcoming election: “*If you want blind unthinking faith, you can go to a place of worship*”. So now you know why you are here – to celebrate blind unthinking faith. In very truth, the other - whether God, or another individual, group or race - becomes simply in Jeremiah’s evocative image “*a scarecrow in our plot of cucumbers*” - rigid, lifeless, dead (Jeremiah 10:5).

It is yet worse. The viciousness of the image has now in only a decade become ever more acute. Technology now allows the transfer of electronic images, the implications of which millions of young people are only now beginning to regret. The image is literally permanent. In our cultural wasteland, unimpeded freedom has brought its enduring contrary. Fixed forever, nothing can be done to remove it. Images have become lethal. A living future is betrayed.

"*You shall not make for yourself any carved image.*" But it happens all the time. Perhaps there is no other commandment broken to our hurt so often in thought, word and deed. We inhabit a society that categorises endlessly, as Jeremiah suggests, adorning our slogans and labels with the silver and gold of what is currently fashionable or politically correct. Like the images of old, these too are the work of the highly skilled, draped in colourful violet and purple, literally so as virtually the whole world appears willing to commit potential ambulatory suicide fixated on their iPhones.

The point, then, is that in this "No" to the constructed image, the path is open to a genuinely free future for the whole world. The God who issues the prohibition wants to make himself the defender of *our* freedom, as well as of his own freedom. We can understand that God does not guarantee freedom - that is why he proves to be the true God in the face of our human freedom to break the commandment, as we invariably do. The God of the commandment does not even promise us freedom as Jesus later does because we have so obviously lost it. Rather, this commandment in a new world seeks to defend genuine freedom for all - freedom for himself, freedom for the neighbour, freedom for each of us. In this, God thinks more highly of human beings than we usually manage to think of ourselves. But, of course, this is always so where there is genuine love.

Can the commandment be kept? The answer is clear. The New Testament speaks of one who above all lived the commandment, yes and died for it and continues to die for it at our hands. Remember, as aptly enough the Gospel reminds us, it is this man who, though in truth "*the image of the invisible God*", took our disobedient images upon himself, and whom ironically, we draped in purple, and with hammer and nails fastened on the cross, speechless except for the word of forgiveness. In terrible truth, we made him literally a scarecrow in our plot of cucumbers.

But there the parody ends, for he did not remain a scarecrow. Those scarred arms are now stretched out for a different purpose. Just so, the living God shows himself to be free from the graven image, the *rigor mortis* of our death, continually extending upon the world his life-giving benediction of freedom. And this for us only because this commandment: "*You shall not make for yourselves any lifeless image*" has been unswervingly obeyed, once and for all time. That is why in this obedience a way has now been offered for all to know perhaps for the first time what increasingly the otherwise puzzling word "salvation" truly means.

As we come together as church each week, this new conferral of true image, both of God and of ourselves, is offered to us in the liturgy when as church we confess of him – "who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven, was incarnate by the Virgin Mary - and became *truly* human".

All we must do is - again and again - resolve to *image* this gift. When this happens, in this one event when God is permitted to give himself as true image, all will find themselves on the way to the fullness of truly human life. For then it will become quite clear that all constructed, and especially destructive, images will finally be shown to be worthless. Embracing this image of grace is really the only way finally to nail this second commandment - not as some imposed ultimatum, but as true lifegiving promise:

"I am the Lord your God who brought you out"
(therefore) "*You shall not make for yourself any **no- life** image*".
