

Pentecost 22
21/10/2018

Mark the Evangelist

2 Samuel 6:1-2; 6-7

Psalm 24

Acts 5:1-11

Matthew 7:21-23

The Third 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 take the name of the Lord your God in vain."

As we come to this third commandment, it is instructive for us to appreciate the order in which the commandments follow one another.

The first commandment: *You shall have no other gods before me* rejected idolatry in favour of the worship of the only true God. We might say that this first commandment is a call away from heresy. The second: *You shall not make for yourselves any graven image*, called for the rejection of constructed images in order to know God by his own giving of his "image", which the New Testament sees fulfilled in Jesus Christ himself. We might say that the second commandment is, in effect, a call to orthodoxy – a word which means "right praise" not, as is frequently misconceived, as "right thoughts", or perhaps better, right thoughts proceeding properly from right praise.

This third commandment before us now illustrates what "right praise" must consist of: to resist taking God's name, that is to say, its accompanying grace in vain - an ever-present temptation for those to whom the truth has been given.

Most people probably think that this commandment is intended primarily to forbid casual profanity. In this respect, we are all aware that as standards in the community change or fall - depending on your point of view - the name of God and of Jesus Christ is increasingly profaned. It is certainly a strange fact that apparently the less people believe in God, the more readily is the name present in everyday speech. We must leave it to the psychologists to tell us whether the thoughtless oaths by which daily speech is punctuated is a form of rebellion against a domination from which an escape has been made, or perhaps more significantly, thought to have been made. An empty noise, "O my god", is made from what in the past was the most real and profound of human experiences, substituting a meaningless verbal habit for a serious confession of God. If this vacuity has any effect at all, it may well make any genuine encounter more problematic.

Casual profanity, tasteless and offensive as it may be to a shrinking minority, is perhaps the least of our offences against the commandment. To try to think of the commandment in a more profound way, we need to remind ourselves again of the power and significance of "the name", which in our day we have all but lost. Once we have understood the centrality of "the name" in the Bible, much of what we otherwise skip over becomes crucial. Here name as priority reminds us that we generally employ names rather cheaply and irresponsibly. We might choose our children's names, for example, for the sake of a pleasant sound, even as a temporary splendour destined alas soon to fade. Names are mere labels or tickets. But at the beginning of history, we find people thinking that possession of the real name of anything - man, woman, beast, city or God - gave them power over the thing itself. The city of Rome

had a “real” name, but it was kept secret by the priests in case an enemy might learn it and use it for hostile magic. It was a secret kept so successfully that we do not know it to this day.

The God of the Hebrews has a “real” name too, too full of power for it to be written or spoken. For a while, only the High Priests were permitted to invoke it once a year in the privacy of the Temple Holy of Holies. Eventually, even they dared not utter the sacred syllables. Instead of the name of God, Yahweh - originally represented by the four Hebrew consonants anglicised as JHVH - the word *Adonai* “Lord” came to be used. Then the vowels from this word: A, O, A, combined with the consonants JHVH, produced the name *Jehovah*.

So powerful was the sacred name in the beginning that when writing it a scribe had to be totally on guard. For example, as copier of the law, the scribe must sit in full Jewish dress, must have just bathed, and must never dip his pen in ink in the middle of writing the name of God. Indeed, should a king address the scribe while writing that name, the scribe was to take no notice of him. So powerful is the name of God and everything associated with it. For this reason, to indicate the change in status brought about by God’s call and choosing, human names are changed. Abram’s name is changed to Abraham; Sarai becomes Sarah; Jacob becomes Israel; Saul becomes Paul, Simon becomes Peter. What, then, could be more powerful than the name of God? The original point was to comprehend how disastrous were to be the likely consequences of breaking the commandment.

Our readings demonstrate the gravity of its disobedience. For the ancient Hebrew, the name of God was almost literally like a live wire, so much so that, to take but one example, we heard in the Old Testament reading how an Israelite, Uzzah by name, touched the Ark of the covenant while trying to keep it from falling, and was struck dead by the divine power (2 Samuel 6). Not really fair, perhaps, from our point of view, but the point is that, in the popular mind of the day, his death was attributed to his violation of the sacred character of the ark which was where the *name* of God dwelt. In the same way, in the Book of Acts we heard of the disobedience of Ananias and Sapphira. They lied to God by making a vow, only hypocritically pretending to fulfil it. They died sudden and terrifying deaths when the lie was disclosed (Acts 5). We would not know what to make of all this without a real consciousness of the power of the name. Such a dramatic outcome demonstrates that to invoke the *name* of God, or to demean it, and with it the *power* of God, is literally to play with fire. All this helps to fill with more profound content this third commandment: “*You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain*”.

We no longer live in such a world. But there are insidious ways that we continue to take the commandment in vain in what we call modernity. Two are particularly critical in our own experience.

The first is the retreat from the Name in favour of *abstractions*. This move is especially dangerous because it looks so much like the real thing; that is, our preference when it comes to talking of God is invariably for the general, the abstract, the universal, rather than the particular, the concrete and the specific. It is a sobering thought that abstract language for God, which seems to be utterly reverential, can end up by denying the very power and name that is given to us in Christian faith. So often what we have learned as the “divine” qualities of God - omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience - these take precedence over, and effectively destroy, the primary character of “the Name” central to Jewish tradition:

“... a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (Exodus 34:6).

Not surprisingly, then, if we start as many want naturally to do with the “infinity” of God, we destroy the knowledge of God's special Name, for we destroy the decisive character of his active presence. The one who says, for example, “*The Almighty is merciful*” is merely stating a theory, whereas the one who says “*The Lord, the Name, the merciful, is almighty*” is turning the universe on its axis. “Omnipotence”, after all, is not something that can be experienced, or conjectured, or revered: it can be known and confessed redemptively only as the power of *this* name. It is with good reason, therefore, that the creeds of the Church confess: “*I believe in God, the Father Almighty*” rather than “I believe in God Almighty, the Father”. The Name, that is to say, must qualify and inform everything else that subsequently will be confessed. A God of abstraction may appear reverential, but it breaks this third commandment.

The second problem revealed as vanity by the Commandment is the eclipse of the Name by employing *euphemisms*. This preference for the abstract and the general is to be found among those who are uncomfortable with all names, even with the word “God” itself, which it is increasingly apparent has become an impossible word for many in our day. We ourselves may well feel the power of no name, or of impersonal names, or else of what we take to be more expansive names for speaking of “the Other”. Euphemisms are common. “Mother Nature” is perhaps the most common. “First cause”, “Universal Law”, “Mystery”, “Providence”, “Ground of Being” are others. Why do we find these so attractive? Perhaps because they are more ‘majestic’, more all-encompassing, more befitting the absolute claim that we are being invited to worship rather than the apparent poverty and particularity of the Name. Or is it that these high-sounding alternatives make no claim on us? Causes and forces may have made us, but they have no voice, they cannot speak, they cannot claim us, they do not judge, they cannot love. Sometimes - always? - such gods appear much easier to live with than the Name which became flesh and assumed “*a name which is above every name*” (Philippians 2:9).

Finally, we must reckon with this. Although this commandment appears to be a negative, we find that it is actually a double negative: “You shall not in vain”. Two negatives make a positive, so the commandment really reads: “In all things, you shall honour the Lord your God” or: “In all things you shall take the name of the Lord your God in earnest”. Positives are always to be preferred to negatives. So, when this commandment is read positively, it sets the stage for the next two that follow this positive form: Keep the Sabbath; Honour father and mother.

This then is certain. When read positively as: “You shall take the *name* of the Lord your God truthfully”, this commandment changes everything. It becomes an invitation to rid the world of demons, ancient and modern. It lets the world again be what God wills it to be. We can put this gift in many ways:

Because the name of God frees us *from* the world, the name frees us *for* the world. Because the name of God breaks the *domination* of the world, the name gives us *responsibility* for it. But most of all, because the name of God drives out the liking and the misliking of the world, the name creates room for pure joy in the world. Therefore, rejoice roundly in this commandment:

“*I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of slavery*”
(therefore) “*you shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.*”
