

Easter 4
12/5/2019

Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 20:1-2, 12

Psalm 71

Mark 10:28-31

The Fifth Commandment

Sermon preached by Rev. Bruce Barber

*“I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of slavery”, (therefore)....
“Honour your father and mother”*

It is entirely a happy coincidence that we have this text before us on what society calls Mother’s day. However, as we reach the halfway mark in the journey that the commandments unfold, this fifth offers us the chance to do something different from what might be expected on this secular occasion. Two preliminary observations deserve some thought.

The first has to do with its location. It falls between the commandments that have to do with the proper worship of God, and those that have to do with right conduct towards other people. Right conduct is certainly the case for the commandments to follow. When we come to them, six, seven, eight and nine are now all enforceable by criminal and civil laws. But this fifth: “Honour your father and mother”, like the tenth: “You shall not covet”, is not legally enforceable. The interesting question then is this: does “Honour your Father and Mother” belong to the first table of the things that have to do with the proper worship of God, or is it the first of those that have to do with right conduct towards others? A further intriguing question follows: Should the commandments be read as occurring in order of importance? If so, then the commandment to honour father and mother is more important than not committing murder! Imagine that! We ought at least to be open to the possibility.

The second observation is that we need to remind ourselves that in the nature of the case this commandment is a word directed to adults, not children. What might it mean for adults to hear: “Honour your Father and Mother”? Perhaps what is at stake is best summed up by the difference between the word “authority” and the word “authoritarian”. Authority is a good word, authoritarian not so much. Authoritarian people are fundamentally insecure. “Do this because I say so”, or “Because I am wearing a uniform”. Fathers and Mothers are not immune to the authoritarian mindset, not to speak of contemporary politicians. It’s a bit like the preacher’s text found in the pulpit with the marginal note: “Argument weak – shout here”. Authoritarian people shout. “Authority”, on the other hand, is an innate gift. Some have it, others don’t; some have it in some matters, but not in others.

This commandment, then, like all the others, is about true authority, not a demeaning authoritarianism. This means that they are to be understood “gracefully” - as expressions of life, and love, and joy, and power, quite literally as grace: not as legalistic fiats, as might be supposed, given the clout of their divine origin. So here parents are to be honoured as those given the task of communicating the authority of God as the guarantee of a genuine freedom for their children.

This is why the fifth commandment offers a future promise: “*that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God gives you.*” Today Israel’s promise of a specific physical territory is unquestionably politically inflammatory. At the very least, we may well reflect that the only possible way to resolve the contemporary fate of the land of Israel/Palestine is this ancient promise of a grace – a grace now to be *shared*, rather than as an oppressive national self-possession.

At any rate, it is crucial to grasp that for the people of Israel, then and now, the community of *faith* and the *social* community are identical. The *religious necessity* of honouring parents is at the same time a *cultural* tradition. It was taken for granted, for ancient as well as modern Judaism, that fathers and mothers are to be human mediators of the promises of God to their children, with the consequence that parents are to be reciprocally honoured.

But not for long. As we heard in the gospel today, that given identity was radically, indeed explosively, called into question by Jesus: “*Truly I tell you, there is no-one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake, and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age – houses and, brothers and sisters, mothers and children...* In the midst of such radical disjunctions did you notice what is missing? Fathers. Why are there no fathers in this list? Because God has become the only necessary Father through the obedience of the Son.

What could be more iconoclastic in a patriarchal society than that! Now a true Son has emerged as the ultimate radical, reconstituting the whole Hebraic succession of generations of male and female parents and children. This means that this side of Easter, where we stand as Christians rather than as Jews, we literally have a new creation to explore, “a new land” to live in. Now that land is not just a piece of turf, but a world that is given to us from the hands of this paternally obedient Son.

But just here let us take the full weight of this revolution. In the gospel, *the community of faith* in him has been radically severed from *the cultural community*. Who would have imagined such a fulfilment of the Old Testament expectation of the promise: that here final authority is taken away from natural fathers and mothers? That is to say, “where God is”, parents and children by *nature* give way to parents and children by *grace*. That grace is a “Son”.

Now remembering that the entire people of Israel, male and female, were designated Yahweh’s “Son”, it is crucial that we understand that being a Son is not a *gender* word, but a *theological* designation. That is to say, in being a true Son, Jesus has at last accomplished what to that point was deficient by the whole people of Israel in enacting their “sonship”. This means that because the “sonship” of Jesus is not a *gender* description, it is an inclusive possibility for both human daughters and sons. For this reason, a disciple of this Son, must renounce parental ties precisely because of the urgency of this promise. Parents who have understood this reformulation of the fifth commandment should be neither surprised nor resentful that this should be so.

But now we live in a society that increasingly celebrates not this *theological* disengagement envisaged by Jesus in the gospel, but rather an increasingly Western *cultural* disengagement from the Christian community that gave it its life. In varying degrees this has always been the case. But it is increasingly apparent that today the community of faith is *in principle* in the process of daily being severed from the wider society. This is inevitable when our contemporary culture insists that whatever “religion” might be, it must necessarily be a private matter.

The question then is pertinent. Has the original implication of the commandment any social future, not to speak of any radically reconfigured Christian form? What sense can be made of the role of fathers and mothers in today's culture – parents whose only purpose in the light of this commandment is to be mediators of a life-giving tradition: the promise and the mystery of the grace of God to their children?

Especially in our day do we face an even greater contemporary expression of the commandment's distance from its foundation. Today we are required to recognise that we inhabit a culture neither envisaged nor comprehensible to that of our text, or indeed to that of every subsequent culture up to our present day. For example, what is the status or meaning of the commandment in the majority of Western societies that have made lawful same sex marriages where the duality of mothers and fathers is in principle rescinded?

In the same way, our text can make nothing of the provision for the bearing, or the adoption, of children to partners of same sex marriages. It is more often the case than not that in later life - when they become adults - such children are likely to want more than surrogate fathers and mothers. Will their search for their biological parents be a "faint echo" of the force of this ancient commandment: to honour father and mother? Will they find themselves to be in a better or a worse position to receive the benefit of this commandment than the children of broken marriages, where fathers and mothers, though no longer living together, are nevertheless still in principle accessible to their children?

Perhaps it is too early to assess the implications of this change to the law that has now been enacted in Western cultures that were originally formed by the gender particularities of this commandment. At the very least, it now appears to make obedience to the commandment anachronistic in principle, if not seriously problematic.

Regardless of contested answers to this question, this fact is inescapable - that there can be no history if there are no mothers and fathers. And if there is no history, then there can be no God worthy of the name. Christians, then, must continue to hear the commandment's ancient words of promise of parenthood in their original intention, no less as in their revolutionary reconstitution in the gospel.

To this end, we might well take to heart the declaration of the great third century Bishop of Carthage, St Cyprian, when he proposed: "*You cannot have God as your Father if you do not have the Church as your Mother*".

If this be so, see how the commandment looks now:

"I am the Lord your God who brought you out of slavery"
(therefore) "*Honour your Father and Mother*".

God and Church – a reconstituted Father and Mother – inextricably united as true source of healing in a now fragmented world. God as Father, Church as Mother: surely a climactic fulfilment of this fifth commandment.

So, remember this transformation when in our final hymn we will sing the lines: "*Who from our mother's arms - has blest us on our way*" (TIS 106).
