

Pentecost 13
8/9/2019

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 3:1-4
Psalm 88
James 3:3-10
Matthew 26: 69-75

The Ninth 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 bear false witness against your neighbour"

Each of the previous four commandments tells us what we should do. Now, in this ninth commandment, we are confronted not so much by the duty of deeds as by that of our words - what we say of, to, and about one another. In this respect, it connects with the third commandment: *"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain."* If, there, God seeks to protect his own name from dishonour, this ninth commandment seeks to protect the good name of every person whose desire it is to receive such a gift.

The need for true words, therefore, requires that we reflect how often we take for granted the miracle of human speech - that ambiguous faculty which distinguishes us from the animal creation, which can only growl, bark, neigh, hiss, moo and twitter. To state the obvious, language is the basis of every human enterprise. We use it to persuade, to inform, to entertain, to encourage, to curse, to depress, to enlighten, to deceive.

We have a graphic description of the power of the tongue for good or evil in the letter of James. Like the writer of the letter, we do not have to search hard to see contemporary illustrations of the power of the tongue to injure. False witness against individuals in the institutions of business and governments; false witness against neighbouring countries; false witness in and against churches, synagogues, and mosques - the power of the tongue is incalculable, not least in changing standards of judgement.

Ours is indeed an age at the mercy of intellectual hostilities, so that it is increasingly difficult, even in complete innocence, not to serve the lie to a far greater degree than we imagine. However well we may have thought we have negotiated the other commandments, it is certain we will have well and truly come to grief with the words *"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour"*. Over and above the casting out of the blatant lie, consider the reach of the commandment when, as deliverer or receiver, we are implicated in the all too human desire to be first with a good, though doubtful, story, or to trade rumour with an air of innocent regret.

Here, as in so many other things, it remains true that if false witness is to be cast out, there is need for much more of that fundamental reorientation which Jesus called repentance. The call for truthfulness, and the consequent necessity for repentance, makes plain that in a world where truth is not the single object of human desire, Jesus was bound to be rejected - "bound" in both senses of the word. His cross reveals ultimate human treachery with regard to truth. Here the truth dies, victim of false

witnesses, of the tongues of slanderers, light obscured by darkness, even at the very centre: “*Peter began to curse and to swear ‘I know not the man’.*”

The powers of darkness which rise up to extinguish the light of truth so close to home demonstrates the cowardice of the outright lie. Here false witness is obvious. But rarely do we find ourselves faced with such clarity of choice. Most often honouring truth confronts us with genuine ambiguity.

In this respect, we might all benefit from a better understanding of how the very notion of truth has been redefined in Jesus Christ. And it is this. When he speaks and acts, truth is as much alive as is life itself. However scandalous it may sound to those secure in legalistic definitions of truth, *he makes the truthful word no longer a simple given*. The ministry of Jesus, above all, is witness to this reorientation, which is to say that his word and deed always takes into account the particular one being addressed. Where he is, truth is literally “embodied”, no longer detached from immediate life. Now truth is made personal, liberated from being simply a general maxim of easy application - which is how the Pharisaic mind, then and now, understands what counts as truth.

Consider this by way of illustration. Some-time in the 1930s, it is said of Dietrich Bonhoeffer that he was present with a friend at a political gathering sufficiently small enough for individuals to be recognised. When all present gave the Nazi salute, the friend resolutely stood with folded arms. Bonhoeffer hissed: “*Put your hand up you fool; this isn’t worth dying for*”. Only when we take account of the subsequent brutality of his death does the sophistication in knowing when an “apparent” initial bearing of false witness is trumped so decisively by the ultimate cost of “true” witness.

The dangers which are involved in this realisation of the truth as living - and they are considerable - must never persuade Christians to abandon it in favour of appeal to some formal definition, like Christian “principles”. Properly understood, there is no such thing as Christian “principles” at all. Transformative realities such as “Faith, Hope, Love, Grace, Mercy, Peace” - these are not “principles”. Although they are nouns, each is actually experienced as a verb. This means that each becomes in practice an explosive *event*, even a miraculous event, capable of overturning every established status quo.

This is what it means to speak of truth as *living* Truth. Notice how this positive understanding of freedom is actually the shape of the commandment. The apparent negative injunction is to “*not bear false witness against the neighbour*”. As we know, when two negatives are joined, we have a positive. So, joining together “not” and “false” becomes a positive imperative: “*Speak truth*”. This means that our speech will always need to be “truth in relationship”, and therefore must always be particular. This recognition means that the hardest tasks we have are assessing what truthfulness requires in particular situations. Doctors presumably have this problem in knowing what to tell terminally ill patients. Or again, suppose, hypothetically, that the playground bully taunts a fellow classmate in the hearing of others with the accusation, overheard from parents, that her father is an alcoholic. It is true, but the child denies it. Her answer must indeed be called a lie. And if she had more experience of life, she might have found a way around it. Yet her lie contains more truth, that is to say, is more in accord with reality than would have been the case if she had betrayed her father’s weakness in front of others. The family has its own secret, and is entitled to preserve it.

The fact is that “speaking truth” does not mean the disclosure of everything that exists. After all, were we to read on in the Genesis text, we hear of the serious consequences which follow our assumption that what we call good and evil are safely under our control. The “false witness” of the serpent certainly appears to be right: “You will not

die” by this serious endeavour. Well perhaps not, but it all depends on what death means. But such is the nakedness now revealed that even the fig leaves we grasp from the tree are not enough camouflage. Instead, we hear how God himself makes clothes for both Adam (*humanity*) and Eve (*life*) (Genesis 3:21). In picturesque form - remembering that the two names in Hebrew mean humanity and life - this merciful gift announces that in a fallen world God is happy for many things in life to remain concealed. If it is too late to eradicate evil, the goodness of God at least makes provision that it be kept properly hidden.

Consequently, “*bearing false witness*” has considerably deeper implications when it takes on a proper human face offered to us in the gospel. It is, of course, possible to bear false witness by refusing to bring to the light of day things that ought to be exposed. Equally, it is possible to bear false witness by intentionally bringing to the light of day things which ought to remain hidden. The wisdom to know the difference is an illustration in practical terms of what it is to own Jesus Christ as Lord.

The gospel tells us how this freedom has been readily resisted from the very beginning, Jesus announces liberating truth to those who lived by the “false witness” of a religious tradition reduced to a formula; rejecting his offer, their only option was to “*pick up stones to throw at him*” (John 8:59).

Fortunate then are we if, in this as in all things, we allow the church's confession of Jesus as the *Living Word* to so fashion the commandment. When this happens, truth will not only have been declared; it will actually have become a life giving promise – a promise that will set everyone free.
