

Pentecost 18
13/10/2019

Mark the Evangelist

Micah 2:1-3
Psalms 10
Romans 7:7-12
Luke 18:18-27

The Tenth 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 Covet”

Considering the nine weighty matters with which we have previously been confronted, we seem to be concluding not with a bang but with a whimper. In comparison with where we have been, “You shall not covet” seems somewhat innocuous. Until we consider this. Unlike the previous five commandments bearing on how to live, “You shall not covet” is beyond all legislation. Killing, adultery, stealing, slander, even - in former generations - Sabbath observance: all have legal constraints. Break these, and you break civic law. But not the covetous spirit. It’s not for nothing that envy is held to be one of the deadliest of the seven sins. Like the power of the tongue, nothing external can control the covetous heart. Ability to keep this commandment, then, will prove to be the ultimate test.

As we have seen in our eleven-fold journey, the commandments exist positively to guarantee what we call the good life; they are not tedious moralistic fences to rein everyone in. So, the question here is: what can we do with covetousness? How can we move beyond assuming that here we encounter a merely conventional moral exhortation about the need for economic restraint? And if we take the prophet Micah seriously, how must it sound in our day to those who are forced to rent, or are homeless, while others are not only home owners but are also paying off investment properties? Who is prepared to propose observance of this commandment to this increasingly disadvantaged population?

In any case, experience surely demonstrates that moralism never really works, which makes it all the more depressing that society has come to accept that Christian faith is only morality “slightly dressed up”- for many, unnecessarily, if not incomprehensibly. At any rate, the crisis adverted to in the commandment is way beyond legislation and high-minded approval. Only a firm theological grounding will be able to carry the day.

But let us stay with the moral dimension a little longer. The commandment reveals that the natural estimation of the “good life” has apparently become inseparable from the maximum possible consumption of things and experiences. To those trained for decades to desire change through obsolescence, or to compile “bucket lists” of new experiences, or to want new things even before the old have been partly worn out or used up - in other words, to the majority of us - the commandment highlights the gravity of the imminent global ecological and environmental catastrophes we now face.

At the same time, the antique quaintness of the commandment confirms that it would be a mistake to assume that covetousness is only a modern problem, as if the last two centuries were an ungodly mistake. Clearly it is not technological advances in themselves that have let loose a deluge of covetousness and greedy hearts. On the contrary, to a large extent the materialism of Western culture has realised an age-old dream, even as we are beginning to

register the downside of what we call the market economy. In this respect, we can surely be grateful for the now growing Western realisation that enough is enough, and that increasingly the critical issue is not the *accumulation* of resources, but rather that of their global *distribution*.

One way or another, it seems that every civilisation has sooner or later got around to discovering that it is a matter of diminishing returns when happiness is equated with an insatiable appetite - in the manner of Oliver Twist in the poorhouse holding up an empty bowl and begging: "I want some more". The solution of the religions of the East, with their espousal of non-attachment, does have the advantage of rescuing people from slavery to their envies. Yet wanting nothing, when carried to extremes, leaves one not wanting help, not wanting love, not wanting God - and the name of this self-sufficiency is pride.

The ancient Hebrews saw such matters clearly. They recognised that the secular gifts made possible by the God of the Covenant are certainly worth having, but they forbade desire for them in the wrong way. So it is that here in this tenth commandment we come to the heart of what was at stake from the very beginning. That is to say, "*You shall not covet*" is a direct corollary of the first commandment: "*I am the Lord your God.....*"

This final commandment reminds us, then, that every other commandment that has come between the first and this last must be obeyed in spirit as well as in letter, with the heart as well as in the outward life. Pointing in this way to the heart as it does, the tenth commandment makes compelling the coming to grief of the so-called "rich young ruler" in the Gospel. He was able in good conscience to claim to have kept the five commandments referred to by Jesus - until challenged precisely on the ground of this tenth commandment. Hearing this, he had no option but to turn sadly away.

If nothing else, this encounter helps us to fill out more precisely one dimension of what it means to understand how we are, and will remain so while this life lasts, sinners before God. "Sin" is certainly a depressing, and, by virtue of its current trivialisation, has in our day become a useless word. But if we let Paul speak, it may possibly be retrieved. He proposes that covetousness is the very essence of sin. Who, in one way or another, can claim to have escaped this universal attachment to wanting and dreaming of something larger, whether that be something tangible, or more likely an intangible? One thinks of the envy that wells up from the subconscious accusing us of our inferiority when we wish, or wished, that we could be like X or Y or Z. The fact is that every apparent presumed lack we experience is being challenged in the call of this commandment.

Certainly, when he measured his life against it, the apostle Paul was brought into a state of deep despair. He was like the rich ruler in the Gospel, only conceivably more so. As we hear him this morning, apparently above all others, he had made scrupulous, noble and sustained efforts to keep the commandments so that he might please God. He felt that he had achieved considerable success, and had made substantial progress until the true meaning of "*You shall not covet*" dawned on him. So, he writes: "*I had not known sin, except that the Lord said: You shall not covet.*" Are we reading autobiography here, or is everyone included? Surely both - his own history, now universalised. He proposes that this commandment brings the core of the human problem to the light of day. When we come to realise that what is at stake is obedience of the heart as well as the outward life, then the reach of the commandment is truly exposed. Here, then, is both its power as well as its weakness. The strength is that it holds up a mirror to our real situation; the weakness, that its counsel remains only negative. It forbids coveting, but it does not tell us what to do instead.

Except when it comes to us as hidden promise. A promise always awaits a fulfilment. So it proves to be when the gospel is grasped that we do not really any longer need to make comparisons between ourselves and others with regard to talents, privileges, deprivations or, at its most trivial, just "stuff". This, Paul never tired of repeatedly saying to himself, and to any prepared to listen: "*All things are yours, whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come. All are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.*" This is only another way of saying that all worldly life exists primarily as a kind of currency of love - a means whereby we can exchange justice with one another on a macro as well as a micro level, and so enter into the love of the creator who, in Jesus Christ, has given his creation all things.

Were these words to be heard, that is, if they were to be lived, then not just this old commandment: "*You shall not covet*", but equally all the previous nine would have been stunningly fulfilled. Indeed, all commandments - of any sort - would then be quite superfluous, for we would have truly passed from a land of slavery into the undreamt freedom of God's new creation. Which surely warrants the only proper worth of the slogan beloved by the current Prime Minister: what could be better than this?
