



Sermon: - 8th October 2017

“Thou shalt not...”

Exodus 20: 1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Matthew 21: 33-46

When my brother-in-law was a small boy he came home from Sunday School one Sunday with a drawing to show his mother. It was a picture of an old man with a beard, robe and a staff and ten little men with hard hats. “What’s that Alan,” said his mum? Back came the answer, “that’s Moses and his ten commandos!”

Alan won’t have been the first person in the history of God’s relationship with humanity to have misunderstood the Ten Commandments.

God gave the Israelites lots of laws but the Ten Commandments were different. For a start they are very simply stated, “you shall” and “you shall not”. All the other laws are very complicated, they are very specific, they give examples of specific situations, they outline specific procedures to be observed in those situations, and they also outline what happens, generally something bad or a punishment, if the Israelites didn’t obey them. The Ten Commandments are not like that.

But it may be that they are deceptively simple. We are used to them, we know them, we’ve noted before that for thousands of years the Ten Commandments have been the guide to right living. Not only did they form the basis of the law for the Israelites, and still today for Jews, they also form the basis of our judicial system. They are concerned with matters of fundamental importance in both Judaism and Christianity. But perhaps to understand them better, for them to be meaningful to us in greater depth, we need to become puzzled by them again. Only when we read something with curiosity and a fresh eye can it challenge us. The saying, “familiarity breeds contempt,” has a lot of truth in it. However, by allowing ourselves to be puzzled, to be curious, perhaps we can find out something new and positive in the commandments.

I don’t know about you but for me, the very word “commandment” has a negative connotation. I don’t much like being told what to do! I suspect that you don’t either. We are adult, mature, rational people who want to make decisions for ourselves. Perhaps we

might be tempted to think that by their very nature God's laws are restrictive limits to our freedom.

That phrase, "Thou shalt not!" has connotations of strict parenting. It makes God seem like a killjoy, a hard task master, a grumpy old man who doesn't want anyone to have any fun, ever! "Thou shalt not" has a wagging finger quality to it that makes us feel like naughty children who can't make decisions for themselves.

I prefer to think of the Ten Commandments as the writer and speaker, and Baptist minister, Steve Chalke does. In a radio interview on BBC's Drive Time, the host of the show for that day demanded of Steve Chalke, "why is God so down on everything we do? Don't do this and that. Don't commit adultery. It's pathetic!" Chalke interrupted with a question. "Does the Bible really say, 'Don't commit adultery?'"

"Yes, it does," she was obviously a bit annoyed by this. "I've never read that bit." Chalke said. "You know that it's one of the Ten Commandments," she said. Chalke responded "Oh, now I get it. Your tone of voice threw me off." "What do you mean?" she asked. Steve Chalke said, "God does say we must not commit adultery, but not the way you said it. Before giving the Ten Commandments, God introduced himself to Israel as the one who's for them. He didn't just outlaw the things humans like to do to spoil our fun. Rather he knows the heartache we'll cause ourselves and others if we pursue agendas opposed to the way he made us to be. The Ten Commandments are God saying, 'Look, I love you. I'm the best deal you've got going for you. Don't abandon me. Don't commit adultery because if you do, it'll unleash destructive powers that will slowly destroy you and your society. Trust me.'" There was a short pause and then the Drive Time host said quietly "No one ever explained it to me like that, that makes so much sense."

But we are by nature rebellious, and we have been ever since we first walked this earth. The story of humanity's temptation and fall in the garden of Eden illustrates that perfectly. God gives a command, and like naughty children, we decide that we know better, we want our own way, God is just being a spoilsport, wants us to not enjoy ourselves. In the very beginning we fell into temptation, and it has been the same ever since. The story of the tenants in the vineyard, our gospel reading for today, illustrates what happens when we allow temptations to take over. It leads to the death of the son, the death of the son of God!

But perhaps if we realise that God's laws are not meant to stop us from having fun but rather are made to release us to have the best life that we possibly can have we may view them rather differently.

For example, I think one of the hardest commandments to keep is the one about not coveting what your neighbour has. Coveting other people's property is a modern disease. We are positively encouraged to want more, bigger, better. But how much happier would we be if we were content with what we have. How much happier would we be if we didn't keep comparing ourselves to others who have more. Or, indeed, if we compared ourselves from time to time with those who have less! We might then actually not just be more content, but be positively grateful for what we have!

Moses would have agreed with Steve Chalke. As we read in Deuteronomy 10:13, he reminded the Israelites of the true nature of God's law when he told them that God gave His commandments, "for your own good." In the New Testament, Jesus told us that his yoke was easy and his burden was light. That doesn't necessarily mean that his commandments are easy to keep. But it does mean that they're never foolish. They are not unnecessary or purely arbitrary. He doesn't force us to observe meaningless formalities, nor does He impose rules that have no value. As the writer Bill Hybels says, "On the contrary, every guideline, every law, every imperative in the Bible was crafted in infinite wisdom. They were given not only to honour God, but to benefit us as well." "Thou shalt not" doesn't do justice to the spirit of the Ten Commandments. I nearly called this sermon, "Gonny no dae that!" and in many ways, that's closer to the spirit of the Commandments. Please don't do these things, God is saying, you'll be much happier if you don't.

As we approach this table this morning we are reminded of the death of the son of God. We are reminded of the consequences of the rebellion of humanity, rebellion which began the birth of humankind, and continues to this day. Our failure and refusal to obey God's rules for living leads us here. But here also, we have the solution to the problem of our disobedience and sin. As the old hymn has it, "sin brings about the cure for sin's own ill". Killing the son of God is the worst thing that humanity has ever done, but in through death we are saved from the results of that sin, reunited with God, and welcomed to this table, the table of salvation.