

Sermon October 8th 2017

Let us pray.

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts do honour and glory to you, O God. Amen.

A great friend of mine who was group commercial council, that is chief lawyer, for a big British industrial company once summed up for me, albeit tongue in cheek, the contribution he made to the board meetings he had to attend. ‘Great news, guys!’ he said. ‘What we’ve been doing is not illegal. It’s just very, very wrong.’

One of the first things we might notice about the ten commandments, or Decalogue, that first example of codified law, given to the Israelites as they wandered after their escape from bondage in Egypt, is that, in our modern western society, only three of the transgressions forbidden in them are against the law, and one of those, bearing false witness, only during legal testimony or when damage can be proved by a plaintiff. For example, in Amsterdam these days adultery doesn’t even carry a fine, as it once did, and taking the Lord’s name in vain passes unnoticed. Maybe this is because lawmakers came to the view that a temporal authority has no business policing private morality; or maybe it was because these private sins had become too widespread among the lawmakers themselves.

Whatever the reason, the secularisation of the legal framework, its separation from religious principle, has had this effect: that if something is not illegal, too many people tend to assume that it must be morally,

ethically OK. Meanwhile, listing the ten commandments has become the stuff of pub quizzes, along with naming the seven dwarves or the actors who played the Magnificent Seven (No, not now, please). And the Decalogue has been caricatured by thoughtless comedians and chippy humanists as a kill-joys' charter, and the Judaeo-Christian tradition founded upon it as a dour moral tyranny whose motto is the archaic locution Thou Shalt Not.

Now, it's true that there are some churches, some denominations within our Protestant tradition, that partly justify that caricature, that stress the fire and brimstone, the finger-pointing and the finger-wagging, perhaps a little too much for our taste. Indeed there are members of this congregation who detached themselves from such communities because they needed a life in worship that felt to them more accepting and joyful and humane. But we should also remember that churches like the ones they left attract more than their fair share of those who have escaped from lives of sin and self-destruction by turning to Christ, and for good reason. Because addiction, to alcohol or drugs or gambling or theft or thuggery, imposes a merciless regime of imperatives upon its victims, and that discipline, cruel as it is, often cannot just be left behind. It has to be replaced, or redirected, for those victims to rebuild and find newness of life. They must have a master to serve, and if that master is to be Christ, even He must be a stern one.

And this leads us to the beginning of a deeper insight into what the Decalogue is all about, and why God's will is here expressed in such terms. It has often been observed that these ten rules were vital to preserve the social cohesion of a nomadic people, that only

utter loyalty to the God of Israel, recognising the importance of family, and respect for the reputations and property of others, could prevent this community in search of a home from degenerating into violent, promiscuous, amoral anarchy. And that's true as far as it goes.

But it's not the whole story. Because this was a people who had been slaves for generations, who had known no life but to serve an ever more taxing master, and who had been robbed of much of the personal and communal responsibility from which ethical systems emerge. Furthermore, they had been released, not back into the mainstream of Egyptian society, but into a vacuum, a physical and moral desert with only Moses (inspired but no orator) and his brother Aaron (eloquent but no visionary) to guide them. They, their parents and their grandparents had spent their whole lives being told what to do and what they were not allowed to do. So to be given these commandments from the Lord, to be hemmed in by imperatives and prohibitions, was a psychological as well as a social necessity - just as it so often is for those who have been slaves to their addictions -- one of those figures of speech that has become a cliché because it's true.

But that's not the end of it, either. When we look at those commandments they seem pretty commonsensical. But that's because they were the foundation of the world's three great religions, and all the societies spawned by those religions, no matter how secular they might have become, take them for granted as, at the very least, a decent moral code that's up for interpretation. They are the base of all our moral thinking, but perhaps we have not thought quite enough about the commandments

themselves. Oh, sure, we've got murder and theft sorted out, sort of, and when we see the initials OMG in a text message we greet it with a weary sigh, knowing Moses would not have approved, but that there are worse sins, and so forth. But when we look at the tenth commandment, with that list of things we mustn't covet, a word that embraces both envy and avarice, it really doesn't seem to fit. It seems to be getting into fine detail when the other commandments deal with the grand sweep of principle. And so we tend to write it off as something of an oddity, part of a nomadic code that's sound enough, but a bit of an afterthought.

Well, it isn't. It is actually the key to the whole Decalogue, and to how we can better pursue our daily lives in the service of Christ. Here's why.

The tenth commandment is the odd one out, because it tells us not to do something that wouldn't show if we did. What it forbids is not an action, but an impulse. Why? Well, partly because covetousness (what an ugly word!), this inner lusting for something that does not belong to us, can so easily lead to most of the actions the rest of the Decalogue forbids.

How it can lead to theft and adultery, even murder, is obvious enough. But what about bearing false witness? Well, if you had your eyes on your neighbour's wife, or his property, or his job, it's been easy enough to denounce him as a satanist to the witch-finder general, or as an aristocrat to the French revolutionary tribunal, or as a western spy to the KGB, or as a sex offender to the British press. Dishonouring your parents? Bundle them into a care home so you can have the house. It happens all the time. And as for false gods and graven images, there

could hardly be a more powerful symbol for obsession with material wealth than the golden calf. For when Moses is absent for too long, receiving the written word of God, the Israelites give up on him, and use the gold and silver they took from their Egyptian neighbours to make an idol, a focus of longing for a settled home with walls and commerce and strong-rooms, in which the acquisition of goods, rather than just survival, can become their principal occupation.

So that is one reason why we are told not to covet, not to get eaten up with yearning for stuff we don't have, because it opens the way to worse and greater sins. But because it prohibits an impulse not an action, this commandment does something much more important. It puts the onus on us to police our own thoughts and desires, before they can lead to bad behaviour.

In other words, having provided us with the imperatives and the prohibitions, the boundaries we need in this moral wilderness of ours, the Decalogue then uses the security of that space to nurture personal responsibility. And so it teaches us that, while resisting the temptation to break God's commandments might be laudable as far as it goes, the truly pure in spirit don't feel that temptation in the first place, because they have banished its cause from their hearts.

Now to say that this is not easy is of course a massive understatement. We have experience and imagination, we are bombarded by malign cultural and social influences, unworthy thoughts pop into our heads all the time, and we drive them away as best we can. But surely keeping them out altogether

must be as hard as controlling our own dreams. The very thought of trying makes our hearts sink at our own inadequacy to the task. But help is at hand, and it is to be found exactly where we ought to expect it.

In the current phase of the church year our readings are following the Gospel according to St Matthew. Unfortunately the text prescribed for today isn't much use for my theme this morning, and I'm not going to try and bend it to fit. But just back around the corner, as it were, in Matthew 19, is where Jesus absolutely nails our problem with living up to the tenth commandment. Because this is where he is approached by the rich young man who asks him what he must do to gain eternal life. At first Jesus reels off the five commandments we mentioned just now, adding one of his own, to love your neighbour as yourself. 'Well, I've done all that,' says the young man. 'What else is there?' And then he gets an answer that gives him pause. To be perfect, he must sell what he has and give the proceeds to the poor.

That's it, and suddenly it seems so obvious that the antidote to this poison, of scheming to get what isn't ours, should be simply its opposite, of finding ways to give what we have to other people.

Now I don't want this sermon to turn into just a fundraiser in disguise. I know it seems like we're always trying to get into your pockets for one purpose or another, and some of the tangible effects of your giving are more noticeable than others. You don't really see the good done by the weekly collection, because it consists largely in the fact that this building hasn't fallen down. The importance of our monthly collection for the Mulanje Mission Hospital, so much at the front of our thoughts and

prayers this morning, is much more obvious, because your generosity has, among other things, given that place a generator so that infant life support is no longer withdrawn by random powercuts. And I am going to plug our annual benefit concert for the hospital, an evening of great French cabaret music on November 17th, because the money you spend on tickets will pay for a High Dependency Unit for the critically ill in one of the poorest places on earth. When we give directly to people and institutions in need, it works, and that is always worth saying.

But what we tend not to do, maybe because it sounds disingenuous, is to stress the spiritual benefits of giving enjoyed by those who give. Perhaps we should do that more. Because last weekend, as most of you know, we held an event here, in collaboration with the World House, for the benefit of refugees, a 'swap and shop' afternoon that depended on people taking items from their own wardrobes to be given away to strangers. The response from this congregation was well-nigh literally overwhelming, and as a result many people who have come the hard way from a hot, dry place to a cold, wet one now have some decent kit to get them through their first Amsterdam winter, and felt the hand of friendship in the process. It was a success.

But what made it so remarkable was the effect it had on some of the people who gave all those clothes, stuff they had originally chosen for themselves because they liked it and it suited them, stuff they'd enjoyed wearing, that had happy memories attached, stuff they'd um'd and ah'd about giving away but had, in the end, stuffed in a bag and brought here, so that someone else, some stranger from far away, could feel warmed by Christian love. And there they were

on the day, excited, watching to see who might try on their contribution and find a perfect fit, almost giggly with the sheer liberating thrill of it.

And that was just a taste of the antidote to the poison. The cure comes, if I may change the metaphor, in the default setting, the habit and the cast of mind that gives, not just material goods, but time and thought and effort, and love itself. Christ has shown us how to crack the tenth commandment, and if we can pull that off, we won't need to worry about the others, or battle with temptation ever again. We will find that we soar high above the sordid accommodations of secular laws. And we will be well on our way to liberation from the bondage of all our sins. Amen.

We will take a few moments for reflection.