



## Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on Sunday 7 March 2021

Readings: Exodus 20.1-17; I Corinthians 1.18-25; John 2.13-22

### I Rejected Parody

People's critique of Christian faith can be sophisticated and philosophically fascinating. Typically believer and sceptic alike, we fumble our way through the tensions between the reality of evil and the assertion that God is love. Such debate ought not to be poo pooped, less still avoided. A religious conviction worth the name must face up to interrogation. to write off a parody of the Christian faith. Around a dinner table or in the pub, people speak of everything they don't believe, as if they are demolishing the whole edifice of my life until I find myself responding, '*Attend!* I don't believe in the God you don't believe in either.' Truth to tell, the parody of Christian faith they reject can be the church's fault. We are not bad at shooting ourselves in the foot with our dancing on the head of doctrinal pins, our tortured and torturing consideration of human sexuality, and our capacity for that hypocrisy which proclaims one thing and practices another.

Moreover, maybe today's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures goes some way to explaining how the lazy dismissal of faith in God arises. A list of ten commandments, eight of which are prohibitions, fuels the perception that the Christian life is only about a spoil sport schedule of 'thou shalt not's'. And the laziness persists when such superficial exploration of the Ten Commandments means we ignore the 'glorious gospel of the blessed God' made known in Jesus Christ:

- the Jesus who speaks of the truth that's about God and lives out the grace that embodies God;
- the Jesus who far from ordering us about offers us life in all its fulness;
- the Jesus whose *new* commandment is to love one another as he loves us.

### II More than proscription

If the Ten Commandments *were* no more than a sequence of proscriptions, maybe the rejection of them might have merit. But what if they were as Calvin and Luther suggested, a summary and sharpening of natural law? Might we see them as a balanced ordering of human life, a cultural code giving a blueprint for our life in community with God, and with neighbours and nations?

Of course, for them to become that, they need working on. 'Working on' in the sense that keeping the ten commandments doesn't come easily to everyone – the temptations they strengthen us to resist are ever present. And 'working on' because in each generation we need to ponder them carefully to see how they might offer us God's way of life for the here and now as much as for the dusty slopes of Mount Sinai millennia ago. I want to look at two of them this morning, not least because for me the commandments, far from confining me, give me the boundaries for a life of freedom and joy.

### III Make no idols

I begin with the second of the ten: ‘You shall not make for yourself an idol.’ I see this commandment as being about our loyalty to God and a balanced approach to life’s demands.

Life faces us with the opportunity to make idols of all sorts of things - in other words, to worship them

- as we reverence them,
- as we allow them to shape the sort of person we are,
- maybe even as we love them.

Many of the things we worship are what we think could give us happiness, so it’s ever so easy to make an idol of a person, of money, of status, naively thinking that if only I get this right, all will be well. Christian faith holds out the contrasting view that the pieces of life’s jigsaw best fall into place as we give God our *worship* and everything else our *attention*. ‘Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.’ (Matthew 6.33)

Having other things that we worship can be destructive in and of itself, leading to obsessive or abusive behaviours. If we have no control over our pursuit of money or power, over drugs, gambling, or sex – if one of those becomes the idol by which we are motivated and driven – we may need to seek help from professionals. How valuable it is that in our renewed building there is space for agencies that can help us re-establish a balanced approach to things which in moderation give life purpose and pleasure but in excess distort and even destroy it. Make for yourself no idols.

By the same token, idols turn us away from God. They distract us from focus upon God, which is why one of Lent’s purposes is to encourage us to turn back to God. There is an irony here for church people. Sometimes it is our dedication to the church that can distract us from God. So absorbing does running the church become that we forget whose the church is. When Jesus is overturning the money changers tables in the temple precincts, it is often thought that he was protesting against unfair trading, or even that there was trading going on there at all. But there is another theory. Worshippers at the temple could only make their offerings using temple coinage. The Roman imperial currency, you see, was considered soiled, because it bore the head of Caesar, or of some other pagan deity, and would therefore defile the holy place. So it is that the money changers were exchanging Roman coins for the temple ones. Barnabas Lindars has suggested that Jesus’ ire was stirred because people were only too keen to have what they saw as ‘pure’ coins but far less concerned to have what really mattered, a pure heart. It’s the challenge for all of us who serve the church, whether members or ministers, that we make an idol of the institution and forget to worship the Lord. As we near the completion of our renewed premises, we do well to examine ourselves about where the temptation to idolatry needs to be overcome with the renewal of our worship and service. ‘You shall not make for yourself an idol.’

### IV No adultery

The other commandment I want briefly to mention is the seventh: ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ This one seems to me to be about our relationship to other people. Yes, I think it is about the importance of faithfulness in our intimate relationships – infidelity is not conducive to a happy home life. And when the temptation arises, if being in other relationships mean

we're not available, or that the other person's not available, then make not an idol of that opportunity and resist.

But as much as it's about sex, might the commandment not to commit adultery actually be about the place of loyalty – and loyalty far more generally than merely in marriage? Is it not loyalty that plays an important part in building trust, and trust that forges society's cohesion? So the call to eschew adultery applies in a metaphorical sense to our work life, too; to our engagement of tradespeople, to our membership of all sorts of organisations, including the church. We will only cohere and be fruitful when we have the confidence in each other that is born of trust, and trust emerges from the reliability and inter-dependence inspired by loyalty.

It seems to me that we would be too glib if we skipped over the seventh commandment as irrelevant to us because we're not having extra marital affairs. It is susceptible to a far wider meaning, which has potential to be a vital component of the rebuilding required as we emerge from lockdowns into the world re-shaped by the pandemic.

## **V      The Cross**

So, to conclude, where does the cross fit into all of this? Is it foolishness, a stumbling block? Well, demonstrably it looks like it. It's up there with the ten commandments as reasons people turn away from Judeo-Christian faith. But ponder this. Might the cross be Jesus's way of modelling adherence to these commandments? He could have gone the idolatry and adultery routes and worshipped the devil or material things or domination. But he set his face towards Jerusalem, there to show us the power, the wisdom, and the love of God. And it is in grateful response to those that we strive to keep the commandments. May it be so. Amen