

**SERMON – 10/11/24**  
**'Love God and Neighbour'**

Psalm 46:1-11

Mark 12:28-31

"Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"  
(Mark 12:28)

As we gather on this Remembrance Sunday morning, it is the images of destruction and suffering in Israel and Palestine, in Russia and Ukraine that are on my mind. And perhaps I am not the only one to be wondering where the answers might be found. What word of command might there be from on high?

Despite the increasing secularisation of our times, many people in our country will be aware of the existence of the Ten Commandments even if they are not sure what any of those commandments might be. It's possible that they will recognise 'Thou shalt not' as a key component of the commandments, a perception that Christianity represents a restrictive lifestyle, directed by negatives, rather than the way to Peace, peace with God, peace with family, peace with my neighbour and peace with myself.

Post modern society reacts against authoritarianism and so the image of Moses descending the mountain with two tablets of stone inscribed with the very words that God had spoken does not sit well in a world where we decide things by majority and then increasingly tolerate the freedom of minorities to opt out of what mainstream opinion may hold. Increasingly, though, it seems that there is no room for absolute truth. Christians may be tolerated with other minorities and our freedom to worship in peace be guaranteed (for now) but what is not permitted in our brave new world is to suggest that there are objective standards of right and wrong. This of course is the very thing that the Ten Commandments proclaim and which is emphasised in their introduction in the Book of Exodus: 'God spoke all these words.'

'Who does He think He is?' asks the enlightened 21<sup>st</sup> century Briton. And back comes the reply: 'I am the Lord your God who brought you out of slavery in Egypt'. 'Not my God' say increasing

numbers of our fellow citizens, but what are we going to say in response? The One who gives the Ten Commandments is the One who has redeemed us from slavery. To Him we owe our freedom, to Him our allegiance is rightly due, and from Him comes the promise that when we fail to live up to His standards, as surely we will, He will rescue us and set us free once more. 'Who does He think He is?' He is not the heavenly tyrant, arbitrary making demands of His minions but no He is the One who cares for us and who seeks the very best for His children. 'God spoke all these words. 'I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of slavery.'

The commandments that sit most uneasily with contemporary thought are the ones at the top of the table. You shall have no other gods, You shall make no idols to worship, You shall not misuse the name of the Lord. The new-ager asks, 'Why shouldn't I exalt another couple of gods or goddesses if I feel like it?' 'What's the harm in pushing a prayer wheel round before cute little Buddha on the mantelpiece?' says the thirty something in his newly decorated flat. 'What's so bad about looking through the horoscopes over a cup of coffee?' says the housewife, 'or having a bit of fun with Melanie next door when she gets her Tarot cards out?' And as for misusing the name of the Lord – goodness, surely all but the most holy bring the name of God into their shout of surprise or anger. 'Is it really such a big deal?' say all sorts of folk from the bricklayer to the duchess. 'Are these commandments realistic in today's world or should they just be ditched?' asks the interviewer in the religious discussion programme. The Christian members of the panel can bring out all sorts of human arguments to try and convince the unbelievers why it is *reasonable* to accept these as valid law, and they may or may not succeed, but ultimately *reason* doesn't enter into it. It boils down to the questions of whether or not we are prepared to accept the Word of God. 'God spoke all these words.'

'You shall have no other gods before me.' Full stop, end of story. 'You shall not make for yourself and idol in the form of *anything* in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them and worship them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing those who hate me but

showing love to those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.' This is not just a bit of a laugh, this is serious stuff. It's not heard to understand what it means – there are no obscure words, no points of interpretation to argue over. Quite simply God has spoken and the issue is whether we are prepared to accept that or not.

But the protestations go on. Surely these first commandments aren't as serious as murder or adultery or stealing. Well, if that's the case, why do these come in at commandments 1, 2 and 3 while murder is at No.6 and adultery and stealing at 7 and 8? Well it's because the first commandments concerning our relationship with God are absolutely fundamental to everything else. If our code of morality is not firmly rooted in God then it is fatally flawed (as we ourselves are) from the start. Jesus recognises that and He emphasises it, as we read earlier, when He is asked what are the most important commandments. 'Love the Lord your God, He says, with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength, and love your neighbour as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.' We tend to push the discussion of ethical and moral issues onto what we should and shouldn't do to each other or to our world or to ourselves, but Jesus shows us that we must first lift our eyes heavenwards and get our relationship right with the Lord before we try and work things out on our own, however good our intentions may be. 'Seek first God's Kingdom and His righteousness' says Jesus on another occasion and the rest will fall into place. Reconciliation with God is the first priority if we are going to be able to maintain moral uprightness. Peace with God is paramount if we are to have peace in our lives and in our world.

God commands: 'You shall have no other gods before me' and Jesus says the same thing in another way: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The Lord calls you to nothing less than total commitment.

God commands: 'You shall not make for yourself an idol.' And Jesus says the same thing in another way. 'Love the Lord your

God.' You can't *love* an idol, whether it's a statue of a false deity or whether it is something else you have made with your hands or created in your imagination and exalted. But you can love the One who redeemed you with His precious blood.

God commands: 'You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.' And Jesus says the same thing in another way. 'Love the Lord.' His name is above every name, His name is beautiful, let it sing from your lips with praise and not be tossed out of your mouth thoughtlessly when you are chatting over the garden fence with your neighbour, for the way we use the Lord's name reflects what we really think about Him in our heart of hearts.

What we *do* in life flows from what we believe, and it's when we have peace with God through loving the Lord our God with heart and soul and mind and strength that we will have peace with ourselves and peace with our neighbour.

Will that bring an end to war in Palestine or Ukraine? Not directly, although let our prayer be for leaders and people on both sides of these and of every conflict that they too might love the Lord God, yielding their ego to the Crucified One and receiving the renewal of the Risen One, that they might love their neighbour as themselves, thinking less about their own gain and that of their nation and more about what will bring benefit to all. In Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, let each one of us commit ourselves today to considering others better than ourselves and the blessing of others of greater urgency than the satisfying of our own desires and let's see what a difference there will be today in this community. There is an outcome that lies within our grasp.

Henry Drummond once wrote that 'The Kingdom of God is a society in which the entry money is nothing and the subscription is all that you have. Or as Isaac Watts puts it so powerfully in one of his best-loved hymns: 'Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small. Love so amazing, so divine demands my life, my soul, my all.' We don't find peace with God through knowledge or discussion or activity but in the trusting committed relationship of love.

"The most important commandment," said Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."