

Sermon: The Annunciation of Our Lady, 2005

Hail Mary...thou shalt conceive in thy womb and bring forth a Son... What is all this *thou shalt* business? It's about obedience. It couldn't happen today, could it? Not in our enlightened times. Just imagine – the angel Gabriel appears to a girl and says *Thou shalt bear a son*. What would she reply? You can be sure it wouldn't be *Be it unto me according to thy word*. None of that subservient nonsense. She would probably say, *Come off it Gaby – have you never heard of a woman's right to choose?*

People laugh if you put it like this. Because the idea of obedience is now so preposterous as to be beyond thinking. We get some brides coming here to arrange their weddings and they are a bit shy of the word *obey*. This shows how deep the new indoctrination has penetrated. And it *is* indoctrination. It may not be indoctrination by sallow priests with waxy faces, bony fingers and a hat like mine. It may be by generously-proportioned ladies with moustaches and dungarees – but it is indoctrination nonetheless.

But obedience is the beginning of our religion. God issues commandments and we are meant to obey. The angel Gabriel says to Mary, *The power of the Highest shall overshadow thee*. The angel Gabriel is only quoting the Old Testament where God who gives the commandments overshadows the Israelites on Mount Sinai in a cloud. Out of this overshadowing God issues his commandments.

Do you understand the work of the devil – how in order to destroy us by removing the possibility of faith from our hearts he insidiously corrupts our language and thought? There are *Boo* words and there are *Hurrah* words. And today *obedience* is definitely a *boo* word. Have you never come across samples of modern parents who would never tell a child what it should eat, when it should go to bed – or even *if* it should go to bed? They think that this would be *paternalistic* and *patronising*. And they say this oblivious to the meaning of the words *paternal* and *patron*. Don't they know they're supposed to be *parents*?

No one today dares instruct, caution, warn or reprimand for fear of damaging someone else's *self esteem*. Is the world mad? Don't we understand that *self esteem* is destructive narcissism – the very thing we shouldn't have? And what we really need is not *self esteem* but *self respect* which comes through trying to be as God commanded us.

The idea of commandments is so repulsive to the modern – I was going to say *mind*. Nowadays there are new slogans *Everybody has a right to his own opinion*. Sorry, I should of course have said *Everybody has a right to THEIR own opinion*. Because if there is such a thing remaining as a modern commandment, it is *Thou shalt not use sexist language*.

The commandments were not issued by God because he wanted to bully us. The commandments were issued by God for our good. My friend Michael Hyman – God rest his Jewish soul – was always banging on to me about what a prize the law is. What a gift and a treasure the law is. Because the law is what separates us from chaos

– the very sort of chaos that makes mad and destructive statements such as *Everybody has a right to their own opinion*.

Well, on second thoughts, you do have the right to your own opinion. And you will take the consequences for your opinions. There is no such thing as a free lunch. But the fact that everyone has a right to his own opinion does not mean that all opinions are equally valid – the heresy that has destroyed the education system.

God gives us commandments and we are to obey for our own good. If I summarise what these commandments actually tell us, perhaps you will see how it is that the devil has succeeded in making the practice of religion all but impossible in today's society.

Thou shalt have no other gods before me... Don't be silly – we live in a multicultural society. If Elijah were to come back today and curse the foreign gods, he wouldn't be rewarded by being taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire; he'd find himself in dock for racism. *Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image...* But the papers and television are obsessed with image and makeovers. Pop idol. *Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord in vain*. Three thousand blasphemies in *Jerry Springer The Musical* and the Director General of the BBC sees no offence.

Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy. No comment. *Honour thy father and thy mother*. In other words learn from the wisdom of the past. Our present rulers do not merely despise the past, they want to abolish it. *Thou shalt not kill*. This has now been revised so that it reads *Thou shalt not kill foxes but killing the unborn child is OK if having it would be inconvenient for you*.

Thou shalt not commit adultery. This has of course been amended and now you can fool around with anyone you like. *Thou shalt not commit adultery* is now replaced with the first and great commandment: *Wear a condom!*

Thou shalt not steal. Why not? It's homeowners who defend their property who are hauled before the courts – not burglars. *The Times* carried a report the other day about a burglar who got stuck in a window trying to make his exit after a job – so he phoned the police on his mobile to come and get him out. Result? Fined £20.

Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour. But without lies and spin the media and the government would not be in business. *Thou shalt not covet*. We have constructed a way of life that depends for its continuation on institutionalised covetousness. Again we have new commandments: *Get a personal loan and take the waiting out of wanting*. *You'll find it in Oxford Street*. *If not there, then on E-Bay*.

So you see the whole idea of commandments and obedience has been obliterated from the modern consciousness. The practice of the Christian faith is utterly incompatible with the secular diktats of modern society. You cannot be a Christian and a secularist. The old talk about God and Mammon may fall a little anachronistically on modern ears. So let's put it like this: *You can't have God AND lifestyle*. The Devil has so conclusively infiltrated our way of life that we don't even recognise his victory. Most of what I have said this morning would be largely taken as a series of jokes. My friends, I am brutally serious.

There are such things as God's commandments. There are ten of them. And you know where to find them. Our faith is about obedience. Our faith does not start with making up our own mind, doing our own thing or saying *On the one hand this, but on the other hand...* Our faith does not start with speculation, with our own thoughts, or with ourselves at all. Our faith starts with God and his commandments. And it proceeds – or ought to proceed – to our obedience to those commandments.

That is the profound radicalism of the Annunciation of Our Lady. We shall not make any progress at all until we can say with her, *Be it unto me according to thy word...*