

## Sermon: Christian faith and public morality...

One of our favourite pastimes in that glorious week of peace and goodwill between Christmas and the New Year was to sit down and watch old films on television. Exciting eh! Well, where else do you think I get material for these sermons? Some of these black and white movies are minor masterpieces of artistic creation. You watch *The Third Man* or *Double Indemnity* or *The Asphalt Jungle* and the use of light and shadow is magical, haunting. There are other advantages to the old films too. They don't have what today's programme describes as *a pulsating rock soundtrack*. And the characters might be real villains, wicked people, but they don't use the "F" word before every noun. But these films are not sedate – not what my mother said of *Psycho*...that it's *tame*. There are murders, betrayals, injustices, lies, pride, hatred – the whole run of human wickedness.

You really can get sermon notes from the old films – because they are studies in the Ten Commandments and what happens when you break them. These old films are like the Old Testament: full of murder, lies, drunkenness, betrayal and incest. All human life and wickedness is in the Old Testament. I can't understand why when you mention the Bible people think *Oh what a goody-two-shoes!* As if the Bible were full of saints. Well it's full of sinners too. And often the saints and sinners are the same people.

Look at Jacob for deceit and fraud – tricked his brother out of his inheritance. Lot combines wanton drunkenness with a spot of incest with his daughters. King David sends Uriah the Hittite to be killed in battle so he can go to bed with his wife Bathsheba. Moses, who gave the Commandment *Thou shalt not kill*, murdered an Egyptian and scarpered into the desert. They'd be exposed in the tabloids if they were alive today, these guys

Out of all this wickedness came the Ten Commandments, the Law of God. We shouldn't be surprised. Strong laws were made for wicked people to save them from themselves. Now the Lord our God is a sensible God. Just look at the Commandments he gave – they are universal rules of common sense to stop any community from destroying itself. *Remember the Sabbath Day*. You need a break. Take a day off. The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. *Honour thy father and thy mother*. It doesn't mean you have to rush out and fetch your dad a takeaway curry and a six pack every time he snaps his fingers. It means you'd be daft not to learn from people older and with more experience than you.

*Thou shalt not steal* and *Thou shalt do no murder*. *Thou shalt not commit adultery*. These are given so that a society doesn't self-destruct. *Thou shalt not bear false witness*. In other words, truth-telling is sacred. The devil is the Father of Lies. And lies are satanic because they draw a picture of a world that is not. *Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's ox nor his ass nor his wide-screen telly nor his ringtones*.

Don't look at the people of the Bible through rose-tinted spectacles. They didn't keep the Ten Commandments. They broke them all the time. Men and women have always ignored God's laws. And when we do ignore them, we shoot ourselves in the foot – because the commandments are given to preserve our society.

So if they broke the Commandments in the Bible days, and God knows how we break them today, what's the difference between then and now, the old days and us? Simple. We have become decadent. *Decadence* doesn't mean just being a sinner – opium dens and Algernon Charles Swinburne paying to have his bottom smacked. Decadence does not mean doing what's bad. Or even fashionable airheads saying *Yah* and snorting white powder. Decadence means claiming there's no difference between good and bad.

That's what we do in public life today. Of course to start with we don't like even the idea of Commandments – they offend our self-esteem and who does God think he is anyhow to interfere with our rights and our lifestyle choices? *Remember the Sabbath Day?* - but that would play havoc with shopping and the Premiership. *Honour thy father and thy mother?* – but everywhere what's tried and tested is being ditched in favour of what's new. All three political parties worship the cult of modernisation.

*Thou shalt not steal?* – but we see theft, muggings, burglary being explained away as a symptom of *underprivilege* and *social exclusion*. *Thou shalt do no murder?* – but we don't take this seriously. For when the penalty for murder is comically reduced, it is the state which thereby undervalues human life. *Thou shalt not covet?* – but the whole domestic economy is based on envy and acquisitiveness, on must-have-the-latest-thing. Adultery? Don't make me laugh. Any piece of flesh may nowadays be pressed against anyone else's in our world of individual sexual preferences and personalised lust.

*That's telling 'em, Rector!* Most of what I've said so far would be approved by the comfortable, the respectable people who think religion is a device for keeping public order; people who like going to church but have never met the living God. And so far I have only mentioned the last six Commandments. What about the first four? The last six Commandments depend on the first four.

*God said, I am the Lord thy God – thou shalt have none other gods but me.* But that's primitive isn't it? It's not even politically correct. When it comes to God everyone is free to make up his or her own mind. What mind? And so freedom of the will is twisted to mean there's no such thing as objective truth. *Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image?* Well at least we don't do that, do we? There may be a one-eyed yellow idol – but it's safely to the north of Katmandu. Who are we kidding? Our society is obsessed with *image* as no primitive society ever was. We are the deodorised idolaters. People are obsessed with their image. All collapses into appearance and no reality.

*Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain?* We do keep this Commandment – partly. We're very polite to alien gods – else we might get run in under the religious hatred laws. But newspapers, films and TV everywhere blaspheme Our Lord. As that repository of wisdom the cartoon comic *Viz* pointed out, you'd better not say anything derogatory about the Prophet; but it's all right to put on prime time TV *Jerry Springer the Musical* with it's 3000 blasphemies of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Can you imagine what would happen if some enterprising young producer tried to put on *Mahomet: The High School Years*? Yet throughout society *God* and *Christ* are just expletives.

And, when he issued these laws, God did not say, *I rather think you might*. Offensive as we may find it, God said, *Thou shalt not*. These are the Ten Commandments – not the Ten Suggestions. And if we break the Commandments, we face judgement. What does that mean? It means we will pay the penalty in our personal lives and in society at large. We are paying it now. Take a walk as far as the cultural slime of the West End. Turn on the television set or open any newspaper for an update on the latest episode in our moral squalor. God's judgement is not a great big *Monty Python* foot plunging down from heaven. Judgement is just automatic. It follows disobedience as the dogs follow the muck cart.

You might think I've said enough. But there's something I've left for the end which is the basis of everything I've been saying. The Commandments were given out of the burning bush – that mysterious and terrifying vision of creative fire. And the words, *I am the Lord thy God*. You must have that sense of terror in your heart and soul, that awareness of the real presence of God. For the Commandments proceed out of the heart of God's holiness and they speak to the heart of our darkness. You must cultivate the sense of God's presence in your life or you're as good as dead.

For he says to us: *Be still, and know that I am God*. And *Take off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the ground whereon thou standest is holy ground*.