

Sermon Epiphany II 2007

I started off the New Year preaching about God and enjoyed it so much that I think I'll continue with the same theme. Last week I made a point of saying that God loves us unconditionally. He is not a tyrant seeking to punish us. He will go on loving us whatever we do. But someone took me on one side after this cheerful message and said, "That's all very well, but what about God's Commandments?" Well, what about them?

There was an item on the radio last week about a former priest – he now works in Tesco's stacking shelves – who has rewritten the Ten Commandments for today. And the interviewer began the discussion by asking if the original Ten Commandments were still "relevant". I am constantly amazed by the way modern commentators really believe that we have outgrown our traditional religion. They do truly think that we are better than our ancestors – those primitive, "medieval" people who of course needed the Commandments because they were so backward and un-progressive.

This notion of progress is so barmy that it needs no refuting. But it is a sign of the secular, progressive totalitarianism of Britain today that commentators and media types keep on banging the progressive, "getting better all the time" drum in the face of all the evidence. So let me ask these little media darlings who think we don't need the Commandments: Are we really so morally improved that we don't need God's moral teachings any longer?

When that former priest read to us his own new, revised and relevant for today – wow! – commandments, I think I understood why indeed he is a *former* priest. They were all about valuing yourself and self-esteem, giving yourself "space", devoting time to yourself, introspecting your sweet little self and developing your personality. So, the dog returns to its vomit.

Actually, we don't need that former priest's new commandments, for the modern world has already devised its own: and they are a brilliant – one might almost say satanic – corruption of the originals. One: Thou shalt have no other gods but me. This has become: Thou shalt have no God at all, because it is rammed down our throats that there never was a Creator of the world. The universe just happened by accident, and we continue by chance mutation and natural selection. And behold thy god Richard Dawkins is a jealous god, visiting mutations on the genotype and on the phenotype unto the third and fourth biological aeons.

Thou shalt not make any graven image. This is out of date. We are obsessed with image. Our lives are lived as if in a hall of mirrors and pretend. Appearance has supplanted reality. The brand name is all that counts. We taught the working class to read and write and now they write all over their clothes: *Nike*, *Rebok* and the rest.

Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord in vain – only ten times a minute on the telly and in the movies. Casual blasphemy is the hallmark of atheism-chic. Keep holy the Sabbath day – except get thee to Oxford Street and the posh shops. Honour thy father and thy mother – which means of course learning from the past. But the new commandment is that the past is rubbish and that we have nothing to learn from it. We just make everything up from year zero today. Thou shalt do no murder. But the

murder figures are going up all the time. And we believe in abortion as a form of contraception: 200,000 every year and increasing. We abolish the death penalty and institute abortion on demand. That is to say we kill the innocent and pardon the guilty.

Thou shalt not commit adultery. The new commandment has repealed this tiresome restriction on our appetites. Thou shalt put it around a bit mate. And when thou committest adultery, see that thou art non-discriminatory as to man, woman, beast of the field or creeping thing that creepeth over the earth.

Thou shalt not steal. Come off it, there's more theft on credit cards alone than all the nicking and half-inching in ancient Israel put together. Thou shalt not bear false witness. Don't we need to be told that, when our whole politics is based on lies and spin? Education grades going up relentlessly – but two out of three children leave school without any English or maths. The Health Service, that jewel in the crown, is operating to third world standards and there's no stopping MRSA and now the super new lethal infection with the French name. Thou shalt not covet. But again our whole economy depends on covetousness, on our always wanting something new, always wanting what's not ours.

God's Commandments are as necessary as ever. For the good reason that human nature does not change, does not progress. We are no better than they were in the Middle Ages. When you look at the world wars and genocides of the last century and at the state of the world today, you might be excused for concluding that we're a lot worse.

So to try to answer the question one of you put to me this week: "This God of love is all very well, but what about his Commandments?" Well, the Commandments were not given because God is a control freak who likes bossing us around. They are not arbitrary. The Commandments were given to us as protection – protection against ourselves. I remember how my Jewish friend Michael Hyam, the Recorder of London, used to rejoice in God's gift of the Law. Here was one of the cleverest and most humane men alive, yet he did not think himself so progressed that he had no need of God's moral guidance: instead he daily got down on his knees and thanked God for his Commandments. He would pray the Psalms where it says; "The law of the Lord is an undefiled law converting the soul". All Michael's study was of God's statutes

The Commandments are not there to make you feel guilty. They are there to set you free. It is the consequence of breaking the Commandments that makes us miserable. God is not waiting for us to break his Commandments so he can punish us. Rather, when we break the Commandments we punish ourselves. The trouble is of course that we can't keep the Commandments. We break one or more of them every day. Only the self-righteous, self-deluded hypocrite believes himself righteous. That is why the Christian faith is not about making moral progress but about sin, confession and forgiveness.

Last week, I quoted some words of Sister Ruth Burrows, a Carmelite nun. Here are a few more. She says:

"There is no need for us to try to find a way of atoning, of making up for our sins. How much self-inflicted pain has been offered to the Father in reparation, in trying to

make satisfaction for sin. But the Father does not find pleasure in seeing us suffer. Instead, God in person has taken on himself the burden of our reconciliation. God and God alone can put things right. Only God can make it possible for we estranged sinners to find our place in the divine heart”

You might not like it. You might prefer the thunderflash of vengeance and punishment to be your religion: the good news of your damnation. You might even think that this gospel of sin, confession and forgiveness is some sort of cop out. There have been people who even think that the gospel of love is unjust. But it is the gospel of love and divine forgiveness or it is nothing. That is the Christian faith and it is nothing else – not that we are good but that we are called to repentance.

St John spells it out in words mainly of one syllable: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us all our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”