

October 5, 2008

I don't suppose that there are many people who like being told what to do! Some are more able to put up with the bossy longer than others, but we've all got our limits – the point at which "I" becomes more important than "you"! In our reading this morning, we hear the giving of what is perhaps the most famous legal code in the world – the Ten Commandments – which, it would seem, is the great "being told what to do". We have heard recently that this code constitutes "one of the most negative statements ever uttered". At one level of interpretation this is probably quite true, although here we scarcely do justice to the commandments as they function in the story of God's work with Israel. If all we have in the commandments is a statement of the will of God in competition with our own will, then from the outset in our hearing of the commandments we establish ourselves and God in a condition of conflict – a very negative effect, indeed. The commandments become *demands*, implying that obeying them we earn God's favour.

And yet this is to misconstrue altogether the giving of the commandments. Listen again to the first two verses (Exodus 20.1f):

"Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery".

The importance of these introductory words is that they remind Israel that it has *already* found favour with God prior to their trying to live according to the commandments, for he has acted to deliver them from their enemies. The commandments are not given in order that the people might impress God with their obedience. Something, it seems, has already impressed God about the Israelites or, rather, *God* has been impressed by his own promises and acted in faithfulness to what he has said he would do. So the fact that the commandments are *part of the story of the Exodus*, and not some independent document purporting to reflect the will of God, is important in understanding at least what they are *not* – they are not sheer demands made upon us by God, falling out of heaven, by which we will impress him and earn his favour.

It is when this separation of the commandments and the story takes place that we hear what is often said or implied about Christian faith: that it is about "doing the right thing," by which is meant living by the commandments (or at least the last six of them) and this is said as much inside the church as outside it. There is, of course, a "doing the right thing" aspect about our faith practice, but we must put it in the correct perspective. To understand what the commandments are intended to do, and therefore why we would bother to observe them, you have to know the story, because what the story does is explain what the commandments are given *for*.

Now, we can explore this a little further by introducing the idea of grace, which in fact we've already met in that first verse of our reading this morning. We are often confused by the language of grace, and find it hard to balance it with law: if God will forgive us our sins anyway, why would we bother with the law? Does it matter whether we get it right or wrong? Yet the giving of the commandments in this story does not imply "forget the law, because of grace", but "*live* the law because of grace". That is, it is *because* of the grace Israel has experienced from God that it now receives God's law, as a sign of the grace. The Israelites receive the laws in order that they might become a people which reflects in its life the character of the God who has saved them and the nature of that salvation. Grace is not our way out of the call to observe the law, but our way into it. Observing the law as it is summarised in the Ten Commandments will be the means by which what God has done will become known in the world.

The Exodus reading set for next week is the story the golden calf. Moses is up the mountain receiving these Commandments from God, and the people grow so weary of waiting at the bottom of the hill for his return that they make a golden calf as an idol to worship and which they name as the one who brought them out of Egypt. On returning, Moses famously breaks in anger the stone tablets with the laws on them. But it is not merely anger which leads to the

breaking of the tablets, but the fact that in creating a "god" of their own the people have demonstrated that they wouldn't be able to receive the commandments in the appropriate spirit. It is not merely that they have strayed a little; they have totally misunderstood what they have experienced. And so they are not in a position to understand what the commandments are, because the commandments' purpose is to create a people who will be a testimony to the work which God has done. The people, in a sense, weren't "worthy" to receive the law. It is a very subtle thing – but we must grasp the subtlety, because those who don't understand the law indicate that they've not understood the gospel, or experienced God's grace.

To illustrate the point in another way, remember the story from the gospels of the young man who approaches Jesus one day and asks, "Teacher, what must I do in order to inherit eternal life" (Mark 10). Jesus runs through the commandments with him, and the man replies that he is sure that he has kept them all. There is one more thing, then, Jesus replies: Go sell your possessions, give the money to the poor, and follow me. And, of course, the young man turns sadly away from Jesus, because he is very rich.

Why is it that the young man is able to keep the commandments which are laid down on the tablets – no easy thing to do! – and yet is not able to turn away from riches, given what he himself thinks to be at stake – eternal life? The reason would be that he is obeying the commandments for the "wrong" reason, and so only hears the instruction to sell his things as yet another, albeit impossible, commandment on top of the rest.

But if we *do* understand Jesus to be saying that selling all our possessions and following him is a new eleventh commandment on top of the first ten, then we've missed the point. The young man could not do what Jesus asked and so "inherit eternal life" because the *doing* was not the point of the commandments at all. The point of living the commandments is to give testimony to the character of God who has saved us, and the nature of the gift he has given. If we have not experienced that salvation and are not living the commandments in response to it, then the commandments will be empty, dry and negative for us.

The rich young man could not sell his possessions because he did not realise or

experience that in the Jesus standing right in front of him was the very thing he was concerned about – the hope of eternal life. For the young man, the laws were not a response to life *already* received from God but the means of winning that life. And so, when he is called upon to give up his possessions he cannot, because he has not yet experienced what he seeks, and so cannot believe that what he seeks is worth more than he already has.

There is a *sense* in which the commandments are without effect or benefit for us outside of the prior experience of God. Living the law is not the way to God, but our way *in* God, our way *with* him who has already made his way to us. We are called to obey the law of God because we have experienced his love *apart* from our ability to obey it. The appropriate response to the apparent difficulty of God's law is prayer – not for heroic strength to meet the commandments, but for the experience of God's grace which alone will teach us that our needs are met by God, and that there is now no *need not* to obey.

No one likes being told what to do, but the Ten Commandments are not merely a negative "telling what to do"! The commandments were instructions as to how to respond to the work the God of Israel had already done in the lives of the people. Effectively the commandments say, "if you *are* indeed *now* my people, live in this way to demonstrate it".

In our efforts to obey today, let the *first* thing we do be to pray for that experience of God's grace which is his first "command" and gift, that we might discover the freedom to live the lives God has designed for us.

And may God in his infinite mercy answer that prayer for us. Amen.