

Sermon Notes for Trinity 18 (15th October 2017)

hang all the law and the prophets (Gospel)

“Thou shalt love”. You have already heard it twice, so there is no need to repeat the text. It may be useful to explain why we came to use it in the liturgy.

A strange change in the 1552 Communion was the insertion of the ten commandments, to be read in full on every occasion. No other church had done this. Indeed, the ten commandments were not very important until shortly before the reformation, when they started to be used as part of the catechism. They do not get much attention in earlier accounts of preparation of candidates for adult baptism, though the material we have does not include the long period of preliminary instruction, so the truth is that we do not know whether they were mentioned. But surviving guidance on Christian living in the early centuries does not generally start from them (it is bound to mention some of them incidentally). The consequence of inserting them was that they were heard every Sunday (because the morning worship was morning prayer, litany and ante-communion) and also in public catechising. They were commonly displayed in churches, along with the Apostles' Creed and Lord's Prayer. So they seemed fundamental. But of course they were not. They had to be interpreted. In particular, Sunday was not the Sabbath. And the Lord had interpreted them in a most extreme manner, such as “swear not at all” (which was most inconvenient to the state).

The nineteenth century realised there were problems. The ten commandments as they stood were too low a standard for Christians; they tempted to complacency. But also, the prayer book was far too verbose, and so there had to be rules for what could be left out (particularly if the Holy Communion were to be celebrated daily). In fact the only attempt to legislate was not very competent, and every parish increasingly left out what was right in its own eyes. And so the failed 1928 prayer book attempted solutions. The rubric before the ten commandments requires the congregation to “ask God mercy for their transgression of every duty therein, (either according to the letter or according to the spiritual import thereof)” but the commandments need only be said one Sunday a month, and if not, then either the Summary of the Law or the kyrie eleison (in English or Greek) is to be used. In practice, most parishes took advantage of this part of 1928, and “Series One” eventually legalised it.

Oddly, we might now value the ten commandments as a (poor) testimony to the fact that Christianity involves (but is not reduced to) a moral law. They serve better than the Summary of the Law because it seems vaguer. But that is to take it out of context. As the Lord used it, it is part of an ongoing Jewish intellectual puzzle – from what could one in principle derive the rest of Torah? This is one of the answers. But the point (in Luke not Matthew!) is “this **do** and thou shalt live”. There was no intention of avoiding detailed practice. So the Articles make it clear that the ceremonial law does not bind, but “no christian man whatsoever is free from the obedience of the commandments which which are called Moral”. This is over-simplistic, for we have already seen the Lord freely revises all aspects of Torah, and He, rather than the Old Testament, binds us. But bound we are. “Ye have heard that it was said . . . but I say unto you”. Bound indeed, less to detailed ordinances, for the Lord did not give us a comprehensive set of them (only some instances by way of example,) than to that practical love of God and neighbour which will strive to do what is right and take rules as a useful guide for most circumstances, while aware that they may have to be discarded in a few exceptional cases. An (alleged but unevicenced) spirit cannot be used against the obvious sense of the letter. This is the proper protest of Continuing Anglicanism against liberalism, whether in Canterbury or now Rome. It is a right protest, but we must be careful. The Lord *did* appeal to spirit against letter. Divorce is wrong although provided for in Torah; and the Sabbath is rightly broken for the sake of an animal – and so much more for a person. We have to follow him – but cautiously – both in his increasing and his decreasing of the requirements of the old law, and this applies to the ten commandments as much as any other passage.

“The Gospel leaves us just where it found us, as regards the necessity of our obedience to God; that Christ has not obeyed instead of us, but that obedience is quite as imperative as if Christ had never come; nay, is pressed upon us with additional sanctions; the difference being, not that He relaxes the strict rule of keeping His commandments, but that He gives us spiritual aids, which we have not except through Him, to enable us to keep them.” Newman on this passage.