

ORD-30A-08

In the name....

During my time in HK, I was involved in helping to set up a leprosarium in China. As part of my involvement, I went in to Sichuan Province with a group of doctors, nurses and leprosy specialists to visit some treatment centres and to visit the proposed site for the hospital my congregation was going to help support.

Over one meal I was, in almost a contemptuous way which was clearly designed to put me on my defences, asked by one of the group who was an avowed atheist, “which is the worst of the commandments to break?”

I naturally asked “which commandments?”

“You know the ones written on stone and given to Abraham”, was the reply.

After pointing out it was Moses, to whom the stone tablets with the law were given, I began to answer. In doing so I realised that the person who asked really did not want an answer at all, but rather was trying to poke fun at my ridiculous faith. I also realised that this person did not really have much understanding as to what the 10 Commandments were about.

This is a common problem. Many people, including those in the Church often misunderstand what is behind these ten laws. They see them as being The Laws and if we break The Laws we will be cast into outer darkness.

Well as I good friend of mine in Australia used to say, “I have broken all the commandments except 2 and I will leave you to work out which ones they are.” (Of course it was adultery and murder.) In fact, if we all consider the Ten Commandments we would probably come up with the same answer, I know I would, some of you may even have more, who knows.

So what are the 10 Commandments really about? If I had to sum up exactly what they were about I would say that they are about right relationship with God and with each other, just as Jesus pointed out in our gospel reading this morning. The first two are about relationship with God, the rest are about relationship with each other, as simple as that.

If for example we look at adultery. What happens if we commit adultery? We destroy our relationship with our spouse and enter into relationship with another person. This then breaks down our family, and affects our children, if we have them. How can we maintain a good society when people are not able to build and hold loving relationships. How then can we be happy when we do not even have security in our own homes?

If we look at coveting we see a similar thing. If we spend all our time looking at what other people own and wanting to have it for ourselves, then we will never be content with what we have. How then can we be happy?

A few years ago Ted Turner made headlines when he said the Ten Commandments were obsolete. He went on to say, "We're living with outmoded rules. The rules we're living under are the Ten Commandments, and I bet nobody here even pays much attention to 'em, because they are too old. When Moses went up on the mountain, there were no nuclear weapons, there was no poverty. Today, the Ten Commandments wouldn't go over. Nobody around likes to be commanded. Commandments are out."

Ted then modestly offered his own version which he called the Ten Voluntary Initiatives. I will not bore you with all of his suggestions, but listen to his first two:

#1, "I promise to love and respect planet Earth and all living things on the earth, especially my fellow species." Not bad.

#2, "I promise to treat all persons everywhere with dignity, respect and friendliness."

What was intriguing about this second Initiative was he violated a few minutes later by bashing Christians. He called us losers and bozos. He did later apologise.

Here are a couple more:

3. I promise to have no more than two children, or no more than my nation suggests.

6. I pledge to use as little toxic chemicals, pesticides, and other poisons as possible and to work for their reduction by others.

I wonder how these will sound in another 4000-5000 years? In fact, what he says is nothing new at all, I think that his intentions are just the same as those of the original version, that is right relationship, not with God (as I think he also is an atheist), but earth, and right relationship with each other. As the writer of Ecclesiastes said, 'there is nothing new under the sun'. And so it was in Jesus' day.

The Pharisees, who were fundamentalist/literalist Jews tried to trick Jesus into answering a question they thought would trick him and so bring contempt on his teaching. But Jesus knew the law, and even more than knowing the law, he understood the intention behind the Law and the intention in the hearts of the Pharisees.

The Pharisees, believed in the Law of Moses, not just the 10 Commandments but the other 360 odd laws as recorded in the first five books of the Bible. But they could only read the literal meaning, they were more concerned about obeying and following the words than they were the intention of the law, (still a common problem in law courts around the world today).

Jesus, however, was able to look past the Laws and see right into the very heart of God, and heart that is filled with love for his creation. God's intention in giving the law was not so that we would be frightened of punishment and so obey the laws, no, the law was given, so that people could learn that a good and happy life is lived when people live in right relationship with God and in right relationship with each other. The 10 Commandments were not given as a punishment, but rather as a gift, so that all people could live happy lives and live in a community filled with love and mutual respect.

The ten commandments and preaching on them may be very old fashioned, but I am old fashioned enough to believe that they still have a lot to offer us and teach us and that they should not be disregarded but we should try to live by them.

Here are his Ten Voluntary Initiatives:

1. I promise to have love and respect for the planet earth and living things thereon, especially my fellow species--humankind.
2. I promise to treat all persons everywhere with dignity, respect, and friendliness.
3. I promise to have no more than two children, or no more than my nation suggests.
4. I promise to use my best efforts to save what is left of our natural world in its untouched state and to restore damaged or destroyed areas where practical.
5. I pledge to use as little non-renewable resources as possible.
6. I pledge to use as little toxic chemicals, pesticides, and other poisons as possible and to work for their reduction by others.
7. I promise to contribute to those less fortunate than myself, to help them become self-sufficient and enjoy the benefits of a decent life, including clean air and water, adequate food and health care, housing, education, and individual rights.
8. I reject the use of force, in particular military force, and back United Nations arbitration of international disputes.
9. I support the total elimination of all nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons of mass destruction.
10. I support the United Nations and its efforts to collectively improve the conditions of the planet.