



Lent 3, Year B – March 15, 2009

Exodus 20:1 -17

A Homily preached by the Rev'd James J. Popham

Normally, I would preach on the Gospel. One that portrays an angry Jesus overturning tables. But I know what all of you were thinking during the reading from Exodus. We lost Moses last year. The real Moses: Charlton Heston. Everyone's first thought when they hear The Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments. Conveyed to Moses by God. Delivered to the Hebrews for their edification. "I am the Lord your God." These are the rules. And just to be sure, let's put this deal in writing. Etched permanently in stone. The Ten Commandments.

Not the ten guidelines. Not the ten recommendations. Not the ten suggestions. The Ten Commandments.

And, also, I might humbly propose, the ten challenges. Not so much in terms of abiding by them, though, certainly, that sometimes can involve considerable challenge. The challenge I refer to is the challenge of interpreting them in a culture that has changed markedly not only since Moses himself came down the mountain, but even since Charlton Heston, defined our vision of Moses on the silver screen in 1956. In fact, some suggest that we will see as much change in the first 15 years of this century as we did in the entire 20th century.

Today, we confront similar needs to interpret the commandments for our culture and times. For example, take the eighth commandment: You shall not steal. Did Moses ever fudge a little on a tax return? Or worry about insider trading on the TSX?

And what about worshipping idols. None of us, I would hope, has even been tempted to make or worship a golden calf. But, what are the idols of the 21st century that might incur God's jealousy? And the Sabbath day. Ever go to Wal-Mart on a Sunday afternoon? And what if you work on Sunday....

Finally, the sixth commandment: You shall not murder. Moses and the Hebrew masses never contemplated birth control or nuclear weapons. Or embryonic stem cell research. Or life giving respirators that can be stilled at the flick of a switch.

So we are constantly challenged to interpret and apply even ten seemingly straightforward rules of conduct. How do we meet this challenge of interpreting the Ten Commandments in the 21st Century.

First, let's understand the Ten Commandments for what they are. They are broadly drawn general prescriptions of right conduct reduced to writing thousands of years ago. As such, the Ten Commandments become foundational for many interpretations and regulations that particularize their application in the various, ever-changing circumstances of life and culture. Thus, even in ancient times, the understanding of commandments evolved. Taken literally, the ninth commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour," seems limited to court proceedings. And originally it was. But soon it was interpreted to encompass slander as well and later lying in general.

At the same time, the Ten Commandments are particularizations of two even broader – and very familiar commands:

Hear O Israel, The Lord our God is one Lord; and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength. This is the first and great commandment And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.

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All the law, including the Ten Commandments, derives from the basic notions of love of God and love of neighbor. Thus, loving our neighbors necessarily involves not killing them, stealing from them, or lying about them. Loving God necessarily involves putting nothing before our relationship with God and caring for God's creation in all its dimensions. Therefore, no correct interpretation of the Ten Commandments would sanction any act that is unloving of God or neighbor.

We need also recall that we are blessed not only with free will, but also with intellect, the power to reason. We can think. And we must think. Is thinking more challenging than mindlessly accepting a book of predetermined rules and regulations? You bet. As Anglicans, we recognize that reason stands beside scripture and tradition as a means of understanding God's will for us. We are called to think and think hard. But at the same time we must never lose sight of the fact that discerning God's will is really just "thinking hard with the Lord." Certainly, we will struggle at times. Where we would much prefer the definite and immutable, we find often find ourselves awash in a sea ambiguity, sometimes clinging desperately to the flotsam and jetsam of ambivalence. Do we look to the angry Jesus who violently tossed tables around or the quietly courageous Jesus who forbade violence to defend himself from an unjust death? The Ten Commandments themselves, however, stand as a powerful reminder that we are in relationship with God. Thinking hard with the Lord admits to God's speaking to our hearts and minds and souls through scripture and the Holy Spirit, to say nothing of the scholars, prophets, and teachers who exhort and edify us and contribute to the rich tradition of the Church.

God knew that the world would be ever-changing. That any set of detailed rules would be outdated in a heartbeat. And that they would be an insult to the human intellect, arguably the zenith of God's creation. So we got only ten basic commandments hanging on the seminal notions of love of God and love of neighbor.

Consequently, we will always be challenged, perhaps, even to the limits of our intellects, but never abandoned solely to our own devices. God was with Moses and the Israelites in the desert, and God is with us today. Let us never shrink from our responsibility to think, but always to think hard...with the Lord.

Amen.