

Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 4 November 2012 - Year B
Deut. 6.1-9; Psalm 119.1-8; Hebr. 9.11-14; Mark 12.28-34

Five years ago I was invited to give a lecture at a conference in the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The accommodation on campus was very comfortable, so I was a bit alarmed to see a cockroach scuttling across the bathroom floor one morning. But what really struck my attention was that fixed to the doorposts of each room along the corridors were little boxes with writing in them.

They were there because Deuteronomy tells the children of Israel to recite the commandments of the Lord to their children, talk about them when they are at home or away, and write them on the doorposts of their houses and on their gates. Observant Jews still wear phylacteries - that's what the English word is for the Tefillin, a pair of small, black, leather boxes containing scrolls of parchment inscribed with verses from the Torah, which are worn by observant Jews during weekday morning prayers. One is worn on the arm, the other tied around the head, and verses when they say morning weekday prayers. Curiously, in the fantasy role-playing game Dungeons & Dragons, the word is also used for an object used by a Lich to contain its soul. In the real phylacteries four passages from the Torah are written in black ink on parchment, and they include the Great Commandment from Deuteronomy 6, which tells them to bind them as a sign on their hand and fix them as an emblem to their forehead. It might seem that there is an element of Big Brother about this - you can't escape the Lord's eagle eye. But I wonder if it isn't rather a realistic response to how easily we forget. I don't mean the little things like names, which cause us such frustration, but the larger principles which give shape and meaning to our lives. To guard themselves against forgetting, observant Jews take the words of Deuteronomy literally and wear them on their persons. We may find that strange, but it's one very physical way of keeping the commandment that we are to love God, our neighbour and ourselves so close to us that it becomes part of who we are.

I don't know what gets into people when it comes to religion, but it seems particularly prone to being twisted to fit the obsessive desire to be certain about things

we cannot and should not be certain about (remember Job!). And to have fixed sets of rules which tell us how to make moral judgements and what to do in any given circumstance. And to go to war against those who do not accept them, literally or metaphorically. Perhaps it's not just religion, but any kind of philosophy. After all, monastic communities have practised communism in the sense of holding everything in common for centuries, as the first Christian believers did; yet communism, too, as a political ideology, quickly turned into tyranny and persecution, with the inevitable price in human suffering.

Within the Old Testament itself there runs an argument about the nature and purpose of the Law. Is it given in its every last detail as a prescriptive code of behaviour, or does it need to be interpreted by some larger principle? Deuteronomy and the prophets are clear that it does. And so is Jesus, who is frequently in argument with fellow-Jews who seem excessively keen on ensuring that the rules are obeyed to the last jot and tittle. But in the encounter with the scribe who answers well and whom Jesus tells is not far from the kingdom of God we have a salutary reminder that not all scribes and Pharisees are nit-picking observers of the minutiae of the Law. This one at least has a very firm grasp of the broad principles by which all the details are to be interpreted: the wholehearted love of God, love of neighbour and the proper love of self. He may be asking a test question - which commandment is the greatest? - but not only does he approve of the answer Jesus gives, he adds that this summary of the Law is much more important than all the regulations about the liturgy of temple sacrifice.

But as I read over this passage, I couldn't help thinking back to another encounter, one Richard Bainbridge focussed on a week or two back - that of Jesus and the rich young ruler in Luke 18. You may remember that the young man comes to Jesus with a question: 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus reminds him of the Ten Commandments, and he replies that he has kept them all since his youth. You might think that would be enough and that Jesus would tell him, too, that he is not far from the kingdom of God. Not a bit of it. He looks at him and tells him to sell everything he owns and give it to the poor. The rich young ruler walks disconsolate away. Why

is Jesus so harsh, and why does he set such a difficult condition, one that any of us would balk at? That's where the actual words in the biblical narrative can help. For the severe response of Jesus goes back to the question the rich young man asked him at the start: 'What must *I* do to inherit eternal life?' The question betrays an inherent self-centredness, a lack of concern for anyone but himself. As if, because he was rich and used to having what he wanted, he could somehow acquire eternal life if only he knew what the price was. As Jesus looks at him he sees all that and prescribes the only remedy which will break the prison of his self-centred world. I think he may have expected the young man to argue back. 'What, *all* of it? What about my family obligations? My servants? How do you expect us to live?' Maybe Jesus would have modified his stance, once the young man had begun to consider other people in his concern. But he simply gives up, walks away, unable to take even that first step.

I'm sure that's why, reflecting on the encounter, Jesus makes his famous and humorously exaggerated comment about its being easier - as I like to imagine it - for that camel (over there) to pass through the eye of a needle (like the one that woman just here is using) than for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. They - we? - depend too much on their comforts and possessions and cannot imagine life without them. By contrast, recall the scribe's exchange with Jesus. It is not about him, but about the nature of the Law itself, about exactly what it is that God asks of us. The scribe doesn't claim that he has always lived by the Great Commandment and has always loved God and his neighbour as himself. He draws the conclusion Jesus hopes any listener will - that you can't buy God's favour with sacrifices, especially not if you tolerate at the same time all kinds of injustices, and that the purpose of the whole Law is to be found in the broad principles the Great Commandment sets out with such simplicity and clarity.

Recall, too, that other occasion, in another dispute with the hardliners, when Jesus said that the sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath; in other words, that the purpose of religion as a whole and therefore of each part of the Law is not to make us conform to a series of dictates it imposes on us and then, when we fail to abide by

them, punishes us for our failures. It is to help us to flourish as the people we were created in God's sight to be. That is what religion is for, and all its parts must be ordered with that end in sight.

The greatest biblical exponent of the relationship between the Jewish Law and the Christian Gospel is, of course, St Paul. In his letter to the Galatians he goes as far as to say: 'If you are led by the Spirit you are not subject to the law'. These words are not a general permission for anarchy. They are part of an argument and they work like this. The law tries to persuade people to behave properly by establishing penalties if they do not. That's fine as far as it goes. But in moral and spiritual terms it is a form of slavery to obey the law out of fear of the consequences, since you'll never do the good or right thing other than grudgingly. The way of Christ, by contrast, comes to liberate us from half-hearted attempts at goodness because in it grace calls and empowers us to choose freely what is good, seek it out and actively pursue it for its own sake; not as those who act under compulsion, but as those who have found a blueprint for living so attractive and so life-affirming that they embrace it joyfully. This, in Pauline language, is the way of the Spirit, and its fruits - love, joy, peace and so on - are not ones you can legislate for. Christians believe this way has the power to transform even the most hardened individuals and desperate situations. The Church is called to cultivate such fruits in dependence on Christ, whose grace has moved his followers from living in obedience through fear to joyful discipleship through love; and to do so not for its own sake but for the sake of those who long to taste them.

The Great Commandment is not a law but a way of life. The saints are those who have made it their life's work, studying it, praying with it, arguing about it, being moulded by it. We may not want to wear it on our person, but we can bind it to ourselves in such a way that it accompanies us wherever we are. To do so means that every major decision we make in the life of this church, including the controversial ones, and all the attitudes we hold without ever having considered whether they are appropriate for Christian people, need to be held under its spotlight. When the words of the Great Commandment are made to shine on the issues we face they are bound to

question us and may change us. Is it the God who creates and redeems we love with our whole being, or is it our limited understanding of God? Is it our neighbour we love with as much care as we lavish on ourselves, whoever that neighbour may be, or do we adopt different standards when it comes to those who are outside our familiar world? And we would do well to remember that when Jesus was asked the question ‘Who is my neighbour?’ he told a story about an outsider who got the answer right when none of those who were supposed to live by the Great Commandment did, and in doing so he gave an answer which still blasts the lid off all our excuses and evasions.