

Epiphany 3 2020 – Thou Shalt Not Covet

Isaiah 9 vv 1-7, Psalm 27, I Corinthians 1 vv 10-25, Matthew 4 vv 12-25

We have come to the last of the Ten Commandments, *Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his servant, nor his maid, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is his*. Update the things we are not supposed to covet and, like *Thou shalt not bear false witness* last week, the plain meaning is obvious. Do not covet. Like last week's commandment, however, there is a much greater depth to plumb. The surface meaning of *Thou shalt not covet* derives from the profound depths of God and what it means to be human and how human beings relate to God. St Paul describes covetousness as idolatry. Covetousness is longing for something which is less than God.

If we deeply desire material possessions above everything else, we shall be permanently dissatisfied and unfulfilled. The more we have, the more we want. Fast fashion is currently under the microscope – the way people buy a garment, wear it once or twice, then consign it to the back of the wardrobe or put it out for recycling. Living like that wastes raw materials and generates unnecessary waste in the fragile ecosystem which is our planet. Evidently last week's must have new top didn't satisfy or fulfil because now it has been discarded to be replaced with this week's must have new clothes. What is true of fast fashion is true of all craving for material goods.

But why fast fashion? One of the reasons is that people like to compare themselves with other people. It makes us feel anxious if we suspect that we are not as good as other people or that they look down on us, despise us or pity us. I am sorry to say that some human beings actually enjoy being in a position to make other people jealous of them. It's probably got worse because of the internet and social media. If you put yourself on sites such as Instagram or if other people upload images of you even against your wishes, you can be judged by hundreds or even thousands of other people. But, 'twas ever thus, only with smaller numbers – the people you went to school or work with, the other guests at the hotel, fellow passengers on the cruise, other dancers at the disco, other diners at the gala dinner. So we feel anxious about how we appear to others. We may be jealous of people who appear to have better lives than we have. We might look down on people who do not measure up to our standards. Either way, our relationships with other people are spoiled if we envy them or if we think ourselves as better than they are. Jesus said: *Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again*. That takes some thinking about. Judging others is bad for the person being judged and for the one doing the judging. It undermines relationships of love and trust. It undermines our own self-confidence if we are judgmental towards others. If we judge others harshly, we may expect to be judged harshly: by other people, by ourselves and by God.

Last week we talked about integrity, honesty and truth. Covetousness undermines all three. We may be tempted to present ourselves as better than we are. Photo-shopped pictures on Instagram, carefully curated lives on Facebook, pictures taken twenty years ago on dating websites. And the internet isn't the only place where people make out that they are better than they are, not by any means. And all this pretence is a complete waste of time. The Judge Who really counts knows all about us, whatever self-image we project. And that is wonderfully liberating. The One Who knows all about us loves us just as we are, *not*

weighing our merits, but pardoning our offences. Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy Blood was shed for me.

Covetous might even lead us to steal or in some way to spoil what another person we are jealous of either has or has achieved. I was recently watching a television drama in which one character deprecated another character's success in coming top of the class and being offered the good job that the first character wanted for himself.

Yesterday was the last day of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity for this year, but not the last day of our prayers for one another and our prayers that we might be one as Jesus Himself prayed that we should be. St James says: *From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members? Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.* Covetousness breeds disunity. Covetous and disunity arise because we are not wholly focussed on the one, true God. God is one. *Christ is not divided... But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him... There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.* One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is from the one God that we all have come. It is to the one God that we all are heading as Christian people. It is the one Lord Jesus Christ Who is our Way – and the Truth and the Life. Our unity with God and with one another is essential. It is what it means to be a Christian, to be at one with Him and with one another. It is covetousness, idolatry, the longing for what is less than God, which alienates us from Him and from one another. If we get our priorities right in this life, then we love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbours as ourselves. I'll conclude by reading the whole of the fourth chapter of James, which brings out these points so well.

From whence *come* wars and fightings among you? *come they* not hence, *even* of your lusts that war in your members? Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume *it* upon your lusts. Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God. Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy? But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse *your* hands, ye sinners; and purify *your* hearts, ye double minded. Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and *your* joy to heaviness. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up. Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of *his* brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law: but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge. There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: who art thou that judgest another? Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: Whereas ye know not what *shall be* on the morrow. For what *is* your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye *ought* to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that. But now ye rejoice in your boastings: all such rejoicing is evil. Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth *it* not, to him it is sin.