

The Secret of a Good Life – Christmas Midnight 2013

Isaiah 52 vv 7-10 p739, (Psalm 98), Hebrews 1 vv 1-12 p1201, John 1 vv 1-14 p1063

Once upon a time the Church of England Communion service always began with the Ten Commandments, straight after the Lord's Prayer and the Collect for Purity. But surely we don't need to hear them every week. They take a long time to read and we all know the Ten Commandments anyway. We don't need a weekly reminder of them. So, first of all, it was permitted to use the Summary of the Law in their place except for at least once a month. Then it was always the Summary of the Law and the Ten Commandments were not even recited monthly. And finally the Summary of the Law was dropped too in most churches on most occasions. What is the Summary of the Law? Well it's what Jesus answered when He was asked which is the greatest commandment in the Law? *The first commandment is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is the only Lord. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.'* *The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'* *There is no other commandment greater than these. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.* Note that these two love commandments are said to summarise the Law, not to replace it. Indeed they both first appear in the Old Testament itself, Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19. Jesus said, *Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am come not destroy, but to fulfil.* God is love. Jesus is God made flesh. The people of God are the people of love. If we love God as our heavenly Father, it follows, as night follows day, that we must love other people as our brothers and sisters. The brotherhood of man is a consequence of the fatherhood of God. St Paul – the apostle, not the Beatle Paul McCartney or even John Lennon – taught us that all you need is love. *Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law.* Paul then goes through some of the Ten Commandments and concludes, *and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.* Love fulfils the Law. Jesus fulfils the Law. Jesus is the Word. The Word is God. And God is love – a virtuous circle if ever there was one.

So we don't need to be reminded regularly of the Ten Commandments. We know them anyway. Or do we? If you were asked to recite them now, I wonder how many of you could? Well, you should be able to, because you now know where they are in the prayer books which you have in your hands. They are also written up on those two brass plaques on the rear wall of the church, just too high up to see them properly and in a script which is quite hard to read anyway. What were the people who put them there thinking? Some of you may remember that those two brass plaques with the Ten Commandments inscribed on them used to be at the front of the church either side of the window behind the altar. Maybe they were lower down then and people could see to read them. They weren't there in my time, but I've seen a photograph; so it's not that long ago that they were moved.

I got to thinking about the Ten Commandments as something we assume that everybody knows but hardly anybody actually does know when I was at a school nativity recently. The headmistress said that they were majoring on carols this year because it had been discovered that a lot of people no longer know what we all think of as well known carols. We think everybody knows them. So we don't bother to teach them. Not many people come to church regularly anymore. Schools, for all sorts of reasons, very often don't sing traditional carols and hymns in assembly or religious education lessons. I'm guessing here, but with

televisions, game consoles and ipods, I don't suppose many families gather around the piano on Sunday nights to sing together and, as the generations go by, and traditional songs, hymns and carols slip away from our collective memory, it becomes harder for parents to sing them themselves, let alone to pass them on to their children. So there comes a time with carols, just as with the Ten Commandments, when what we assumed everybody knew, in fact hardly anybody actually does know.

Apparently, the same process is happening with nursery rhymes, the traditional ones, like *Little Boy Blue* and *Little Miss Muffet*, being replaced with *The Wheels on the Bus* (which is fine by me) and advertising jingles, which is a bit more worrying. I'm not sure that I like the idea of a mother crooning to her infant, *Murray mints, Murray mints, too good to hurry mints*, or *Softness is a thing called comfort*. but I am told that it is not uncommon.

Does it matter? To be perfectly honest, when I was a child in the 1950s, my parents and grandparents even then had a very limited repertoire of traditional nursery rhymes and, as a consequence, so did I. You may remember that in that decade Iona and Peter Opie were collecting children's rhymes on an enormous scale in the face of claims that even sixty years ago traditional folklore was being killed off by the development of mass media and the breakdown of traditional communities. Perhaps today's children don't need to know old fashioned rhymes and stories set in preindustrial society any more than they need to know how to light the living room fire or which of the nuts and berries they encounter as they run home from school than can safely eat or how to turn the heel when making a sock. They possibly don't know a lot of old ladies who live in a shoe. The point about tradition is that it evolves to meet contemporary needs. If it does not evolve, tradition dies and is consigned to the museum where it is only of interest to scholars, perhaps to be revived at some future date, if it finally acquires renewed relevance.

Does it matter? It is increasingly difficult, I find, when arranging weddings and funerals to find hymns, prayers and bible readings which are familiar to people. It is not that people now want modern hymns and worship songs in place of more traditional hymns or that they want modern prayers. That wouldn't be a problem. The problem is that so many people don't know any hymns or prayers at all. The tradition hasn't evolved. It has died out. It has died of neglect. And yet, presumably, the people who these days come to me for weddings and funerals are looking for words in which to express religious feelings. Either they have faith or they are seeking faith. It is perfectly possible nowadays to have a civil marriage in an attractive venue or to have a humanist funeral. So there is no need for people to come to the Church on these occasions unless they have some sort of faith which presumably they want to express. Being totally unfamiliar with the Christian tradition, people often find themselves requesting pop music or poems they've found on the internet. Some of these are very good, but quite a lot of them are not. A good hymn or sacred song or prayer not only expresses how you feel; it also gives shape to your thoughts. It helps to form you as a person. If you like, a good hymn or prayer doesn't merely say what you feel at the time; it helps you to feel what you are saying. By taking the focus off you as the centre of your attention, it sets you free to become the person you potentially are in God. Strangely enough, it is only when we look outside ourselves that we really find ourselves. The person who comes to the Church as a customer looking for what he or she wants to purchase will go

away disappointed. It is the person who comes to Church as a worshipper who discovers that he or she has found everything that is necessary to personal fulfilment in what God freely gives to those who ask in faith. Ancient hymns or modern, new prayers or old? That's not the issue. Tradition is of great value. Tradition evolves. But no hymns? No sacred music? No prayers? No wonder people are lost. I started this section by saying that it is difficult to find familiar hymns, prayers and bible readings. People don't know the basic bible stories any longer. Now that is a worry because the Bible is the Word of God. But whose fault is it if the Bible is a closed book to so many?

Tonight's reading from Isaiah began, *How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good; that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth!* It is no use deploring the fact that people don't know carols or the Lord's prayer or hymns or bible stories or the Ten Commandments if we don't teach them. It is the responsibility of parents and teachers and clergy and the whole community to pass on our traditions down the generations. Yes, of course we need to discriminate. Times change. People change. There is good stuff from the past which should never be lost. There is dross from the past which it wouldn't hurt at all if it was lost and forgotten. There are in every generation new expressions of the eternal truth. It is our responsibility to pass on the bible stories and the best of our carols and hymns and religious poetry and liturgy. It is our responsibility to pass on the tradition that has come down to us in a way that makes sense to a new generation. It is our responsibility to continue ourselves to grow and to develop. Jesus said, *Therefore every scribe which is instructed unto the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things old and new.* Things old and new, the things of God. It is the knowledge of God which it is imperative that we share with other people, with our contemporaries and with our children. That is why Jesus was born, so that people might know God, and so that, knowing God, we might have eternal life. This is what we have to share with the rest of the world. It is good news for everyone, but only if everyone hears the good news and they won't hear it unless those who already know the good news share it.

Back to those Ten Commandments. For two reasons I am a bit uneasy about what I have already said about learning the commandments. One of those reasons is that Christianity is not a set of rules. It is not hard to present it that way but, if we do present Christianity as a set of rules, it is not surprising if we put people off. It puts things the wrong way round if we imply that our relationship with God depends on how we behave. It is not that God loves us if we are good, if we keep the commandments. It is that God loves us and, because He loves us, He solicits our love; He woos us; He woos us with gifts of love, the greatest of which is His Son Jesus Christ. His love for us elicits our love for Him. It is because we love Him that we seek to keep His commandments. Jesus said, *If ye love me, keep my commandments.* What is His commandment? *That ye love one another, as I have loved you.* The virtuous circle again. God doesn't love us because we deserve to be loved. God just loves us. Because God loves us, He calls upon us to love Him. If we love Him we keep His commandments, which are summarised in the command to love. We not only heard the Ten Commandments at the beginning of our service today. We listened also to the Beatitudes, the blessings which God so freely pours out on the world.

And this is the other reason why I am slightly uneasy about what I said at the beginning about the importance of the Ten Commandments – and indeed of the Summary of the Law. These are not external to ourselves. They are not fine words to inscribe on brass plates and screw to the church wall. They are not simply written in the Bible for us to read and mark. If we are Christians, the Word of God is engrafted in our hearts. The prayer goes on that we should *read, mark and inwardly digest them*. What we inwardly digest becomes an aspect of ourselves. We are what we eat. Knowing the Ten Commandments is not simply a matter of learning them by heart so that we can recite them in the Scripture test. Neither is knowing the Ten Commandments a matter of obeying them in the hope of avoiding punishment or of earning God's favour. If we are Christians, it is our nature to love, our nature to keep the commandments. Love is what we are before it is what we do or say.

St Augustine of Hippo: *"Love God and do whatever you please: for the soul trained in love to God will do nothing to offend the One who is Beloved."*

The commandments are more of a check list of the genuineness of our love.

So finally, *God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom he also made the worlds*. Not a set of rules, but a relationship, He in us and we in Him, a relationship to share with the whole world: with our children and the rest of our families, with our neighbours, friends and colleagues, with the wider community and indeed with the whole of creation, and so we celebrate this Christmas and in all time and in eternity, *Christ in you, the hope of glory*.

Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, Unto him be glory in the Church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.