



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD, *Rector*
John Scott, LVO, D. Mus., *Organist and Director of Music*
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, January 27, 2013
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Choral Evensong
at 4pm

+
A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin, Ph.D.
on
Exodus 20
Deuteronomy 5
+

Sermon Series: Commandments as Good News
SERMON 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE DECALOGUE

Today the clergy of Saint Thomas begin a sermon series that we are calling “Commandments as Good News.” We are going to look at the main commandments of the Bible, the Ten Commandments first, and then commandments that Jesus gave, culminating in May with the “new commandment” that he gave at the Last Supper, “that you love one another as I have loved you.” We are offering this series because, although there is a high level of awareness about commandments---the Ten, and Jesus’---there is not, we think, much understanding of either the details of the commandments or---and this is even more important---the point of God giving commandments to us.

I start with something basic. Why do we say there are *Ten* Commandments? If you look at Exodus 20, where the commandments are first spoken by God, or at Deuteronomy 5, where Moses in his long farewell speech goes through the commandments again, in neither place is it said that they are ten in number. Elsewhere in the Old Testament they are referred to as the ten commandments, but not at the time of their delivery. In fact there are two varying traditions about how they are to be counted. What we Episcopalians consider commandments number 1 and 2, other traditions combine as the first commandment. And what we take as the 10th commandment, other traditions divide into commandments number 9 and 10.

So much for the “ten.” How about the other word, “commandments”? In Hebrew, in fact, they are not called “commandments”; they are called “words.” In Exodus 20:1, at the introduction to the as-yet unnumbered commandments, it says, “God spoke these words.” And elsewhere in the Old Testament where they are numbered as ten, they are still not called commandments; they are called “the ten words.” This point is conveyed when we refer to the Ten Commandments as the “Decalogue.” That word comes from the Greek, with the prefix “dec” meaning “ten” (as in, say, “decimal”), and “logue” meaning “word,” as in the famous opening of Saint John’s Gospel, “In the beginning was the Logos---the Word.”

It is an interesting datum that our tradition has understood the Ten Words, the Decalogue, as the Ten Commandments. It is as if we have intuited that, were God to address us, were God to speak to us, that word from God could not help but be experienced by us as a commandment.

Consider the context of the delivery of the Ten Commandments as given in the book of Exodus.

God has come down upon Mount Sinai, and has summoned Moses up to the top of the mountain. There are barriers down at the bottom of the mountain so that the people won't follow Moses up. And you read this, and it reads like a report of some sort, a bit of history; this happened, and then he did such and such and they did so and so, and then God told Moses, and then Moses replied, and so on. God tells Moses to go back down to make sure the people don't follow him up. Moses goes down.

And then suddenly the text says: "And God spoke these words." And there they just appear, the Ten Commandments.

And once they are done, the reportage resumes. Moses, back on the mountain, is told by God what to say to the people, and so forth. The impression is, in a sense, like modern fiction, where there's suddenly a chunk of text that doesn't clearly fit into what's around it, and you aren't sure where you are or who is listening to this. What I mean is: from the text itself, it is not clear that God is up on the mountain when he speaks these words. And it is not altogether clear where Moses is when God is speaking. And—to the point—it is not clear that Moses, only, is the one who hears God's voice.

But in the sequel, God does, in fact, tell Moses to tell the people that they have heard God speak. However it was that it happened, the people did in fact hear God themselves. And they didn't just hear meaningless mystery—they heard God's intelligible words. "I have talked with you from heaven," God says.

So here's the point: we have commandments because God has spoken to us.

Commandments come out of a relationship that is marked by speaking. If God did not care about us enough to speak to us, there would be no commandments. And conversely, if God does care enough about us to speak to us, it means that God wants us to be on his level. Any word at all from God to us will include—cannot but include—a summons for us to be, as we say, on the level: on his level! Even if God were to say something trivial to us—imagine, for instance, God strolling past and saying "Have a nice day"—coming from God, those otherwise slight words become heavy with meaning. If you tell me to have a nice day, I can go on as if you said nothing. If God tells me, I have received a Word, and that Word changes me.

The change that God's words make to humans is properly called liberation. God sets us free both from sin and from merely human existence. God speaks to us and lifts us up to his level, free to live with him and by him. That's why this series has the title it has. Commandments from God are just God speaking to us. And that God does in fact speak to us is the best news ever.

And so the commandments begin. At the beginning of the Decalogue, God says, "I am the LORD thy God, who brought thee out of the house of bondage." Our God, when he speaks, first identifies himself as the God of liberation. He led the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery into freedom. Then he spoke to them. The leading and the speaking are one movement, one process.

God commands—God speaks—God liberates. Commandments are good news.

For details, stay tuned!