**10th November 2013**

**Exodus 20:1–4, 7–9, 12–20**

Tony Campolo tells the story of how a friend of his was at dinner with a World War II veteran. As they talked the man related a story of what it was like during the famous Battle of the Bulge. He described how one foggy rainy morning his commanding officer commanded his unit to go out and shoot any of the enemy that were lying about wounded. Of course, this did not fit in with the Geneva Convention, but given the confusion and disarray of a battle in which there were no clearly drawn lines, the officer believed that it had to be done. In this battle the rules had been abandoned, and the prisoners were not to be taken.

The veteran then told about coming upon a German soldier sitting on the ground with his back against a tree. He wasn’t wounded. He was just too tired to go on. Totally dissipated. There was nothing left in the way of will power. He was too listless and tired to resist anything or anyone. The man telling the story said ‘As I aimed my gun at him, he asked me to wait a moment. Speaking in English, he told me he wanted a chance to pray before he died. I immediately sat down with him as I realised that he was a Christian brother. We talked about our families. I showed him pictures of my children. He showed me photographs of his family. We read some scriptures together. It was wonderful.’

Campolo’s friend asked ‘well? What did you do?’ When the man didn’t answer, his friend kept pressing ‘What did you do? What did you do?’

The man said, ‘I stood up, aimed the gun at him, and said, ‘You’re a Christian and I am a Christian. I’ll see you in heaven.’ And I shot him!’

Let us not be sentimental about war. The rules go out of the window. Barbarity is often the norm and humanity sinks low in the mire of sin and depravity. God’s commands are ignored and put to onside. It is purely hypothetical to ask you what would you have done in the situation of the battle of the Bulge when your commanding officer had told you to contravene the Geneva Convention and go out and shoot all the surviving enemy soldiers.

We have just sung I vow to thee my country. The love that asks no question. The army wouldn’t function if every soldier had a debate on whether they should or should not obey orders. The heat of battle is one thing; the cool of a debating chamber of a court of law is another. I am not for minute seeking to excuse those who do not uphold the rules – things like the Geneva Convention on the treatment of prisoners of war. All I am saying is that all war is dreadful. I wish the nations of this world would spend more on diplomacy and aid, than arms and sabre rattling.

Being a Christina is always going to put you in an uncomfortable place. What would Jesus do? Would Jesus have shot the guy at the Battle of the Bulge?

Do the Ten Commandments that are our focus text today prohibit killing, murder, and war?

Some Christians believe they do, others believe they don’t. The Old Testament has many divinely sanctioned wars so if God meant no wars in this commandment then god didn’t follow through with it according to the Old Testament. Yet Jesus said love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.

There is a bumper sticker in the United States that says ‘when Jesus said love your enemies, he probably meant we shouldn’t kill them’

He died on the cross and people mocked him for being weak and ineffective. If he is the Son of God why doesn’t he unleash an army of angels to save him? Caesar, the self-proclaimed Son of God, had no hesitation to resort to violence to get his way. Yet this Jesus meekly dies on a cross. What is going on?

Yet I would claim Jesus was no pushover. He was not passive. He resisted evil but not by mirroring it. Oppressors were resisted without being emulated, enemies could be neutralised without being destroyed.

Paul would write about the need for the state to uphold laws and keep evil in check, the implicit assumption being that sometimes force is necessary. Just war theories have been developed through this. The idea of necessary evil. If someone broke into your house and threatened to shoot your wife and kids and the only way to stop them was to shoot them would you do it? I guess I probably would. But it still wouldn’t be right.

I can’t give you the answer – and tell you what you have to do. We each individually have to work out our faith in fear and trembling.

Today we do remember those who are the victims of war. Jesus said those who live by the sword die by the sword. Many military personnel live scarred lives because of their experiences. It may make good film musicals like Sunshine on Leith, a film about a couple of soldiers trying to return to civvy life in Scotland. But the realities for many are harsh. Many suffer from emotional breakdowns, psychological disorders, substance addiction and even homelessness. I don’t believe we are meant to kill, which is what this command is about. So when we do it, it kills a part of us. The one who picks up the sword also suffers as the one who dies from the sword. There are no winners in war.

The Ten Commandments give the impression of an authoritarian God. With a command to obey orders and don’t question. Certainly many passages in the bible give that impression. But context is important. The people of Israel are on their wilderness journey escaping from slavery and oppression in Egypt. In Exodus 19 we find them at the mountain of Sinai. The giving of the Ten Commandments becomes a sign of God’s covenant with the people of Israel. They are a practical outworking of God’s intention for God’s people to live whole and healthy lives. The intention is to establish a social rule that contrasts to life under Pharaoh so the first thing that is said is ‘I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt out of the land of slavery’. What they hear next in the Ten Commandments are God’s strategy for fending off a return to the pre Exodus conditions of exploitation and brutality within the community. The commandments are policies intended to create a society that practices God’s justice instead of Pharaoh’s injustice, and to establish neighbourly well-being instead of coercion, fear, and exploitation.

What policies were indispensable to prevent a return to pre Exodus exploitation? You could consider all ten of these commandments but there are three broad themes. The first three commandments assert that there is only one God, who cannot be recruited or used for any social or human agenda.

When we make what is not God God – things start to go wrong. Nationalism, materialism, success, status, are often quoted as the idols of our time. When we make what is not god God we lose perspective and we become enslaved to gods that have not got our best interest first. Money of course is the biggest idol of our time and this god causes no amount of anxiety and chaos and misery. It needs cutting down to size to ensure that it serves the interests of society and not the other way round.

The marriage of God and country in nationalism is always toxic. I reads of a woman in the United States who had been brought up as a Muslim but who had become interested in Christianity because of the message of grace. But as she watched the war in Afghanistan she had come to give up on God that blesses bombs and killing. ‘My government and your government are both doing the same thing – creating terrible violence and asking God to bless it. I want nothing to do with that god’.

The second set of commandments concern human social relationships. They seek to make human community possible by setting limits to the acquisitive capacity of members of the community – the capacity to seize and confiscate by power or cunning what is necessary to the life of the neighbour. Do not steal, do not commit adultery, do not covet, cheat, lie. These commands set limits that require each person to conduct themselves as a responsible member of the community. This set of limits to protect people and their property. It was designed to stop the powerful pharaohs coming along and leaving you destitute.

Thirdly special mention must be made of the fourth commandment on Sabbath where we find at the core of creation the invitation to rest. In the version in Deuteronomy (5.12-15) this command is rooted in the Exodus memory and concerns rest for the slaves. Here it is connected to the order of creation. It looks backwards and imagines God on the seventh day either spent and needing to rest, thus vulnerable, or so serenely situated in creation that God was able to be at ease. Either way, the conduct of God on the seventh day is in sharp contrast to the world of Pharaoh, in which there is no rest but only feverish productivity. Work, work, work you slaves! The command is about respecting life and putting limits on production and consumption. It was a call to rest but also to rest in the presence of God – this is a holy day – to find your peace and security in the love of God and not in feverish activity.

Walter Brueggemann says this: ‘The ten commandments are a crucial line of defence against the destructive nihilism in the world. Nihilism, the conviction that there are no reliable values, no absolutes, results not in freedom but in the brickyard of Pharaoh where human life is completely exploitable, a deep and earthly disorder that is located not far from the ovens of Auschwitz. The God who commands knows very well what the exploitative commands of pharaoh will yield, and knows as well an alternative set of commands that authorize another way in the world. And it is to these alternative commands that Israel assents.’

There is much debate and movement to remove God from our public life. A recent attempt to stop people in court from swearing their oath on the Bible ‘I promise by Almighty God to tell the truth, the whole and nothing but the truth’ was defeated, just. Many say we don’t need God to set our laws and rules. IAs I have already mentioned, in times of war, rules go out of the window. We live in a secular society. It is now fashionable not to believe in God. Humanity, the Bible tells us, has always been in rebellion to its creator. Humanity has always wanted to do things its own way. This is no surprise. Our society doesn’t like absolutes – it’s all a personal opinion. God is problematic. Yet realties are realities. God either does or doesn’t exist.

If god doesn’t exist then arguably the logical position is the nihilism that Brugeeman suggest. No reliable values. No sense of the ultimate value and worth of each human individual. We are all expendable. No matter how many United Nations resolutions you pass – it is only some people’s opinion. Other people will disagree.

As followers of Christ we are called to live by god’s ways and witness to these commands as a crucial line of defence against a valueless world of meaninglessness.

Let me end with another powerful story from World War II which witnesses to a different way in the world.

It concerns a church leader in Bulgaria named Metropolitan Kyril. When the Nazis rounded up the Jews in his city and herded them into a barbed wire enclosure, he decided to act. The train that was supposed to take Jews to Auschwitz pulled up at the station. The SS guards were just about to load the Jews into the box cars that would take them to the gas chambers when suddenly, out of the darkness, metropolitan Kyril appeared. He was a tall man to start with, but as an Orthodox priest, he wore a mitre on his head, which must have made him appear like a giant as he emerged out of the darkness. He was wearing his black robes and his white beard hung over him. Marching behind him were many of the townspeople.

Kyril went to the entrance of the barbed wire enclosure, which was then surrounded by his supporters. When the Nazi guards tried to stop him, he laughed at them and pushed aside their guns. He went in among the Jews and as they surrounded him, crying hysterically, he raised his hands. He quoted one verse of scripture, and with that verse he contributed significantly to the changing of the destiny of a nation. Quoting from the Book of Ruth he declared to his Jewish friends, ‘whither thou goest, I will go. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God’.

The Jews cheered and the Christians joined in the cheering. They were no longer separate peoples. They had become one in the declaration of the Word of God.

Because of such heroics, not a single Bulgarian Jew ever died in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II, in spite of the fact that Bulgaria was one of the Nazi powers.

In the original Hebrew language these commandments might have been ten words, a kind of shorthand for guidance handed down from generation to generation. What has been translated in to English as ‘you shall not’ could also mean ‘you will not’ in the original Hebrew Text. This opens up the possibility of seeing that one day, if all are living in a right relationship with God, there will not be murder, or stealing and so on.

In giving the Ten Commandments God invites us to choose to do things that will make the world a better place – free from exploitation and corruption the Ten Commandments can become a vision of where we are heading in Christ. 'You shall not' comes with an authoritarian tone. ‘You will not’ suggests how through a developing relationship our personalities and lives are moulded into the purposes and ways of God.

May God lead us into being people whose ways are ways of gentleness and all our paths are peace.

Stories from

T. Campolo, *Let me tell you a story ,* Word Books 2000

W Brueggemann, The Covenanted Self, Fortress Press.

S. Claiborne and T Campolo, Red Letter Christians, Hodder, 2012

**Call to worship**

The law of God is perfect, reviving the soul

More to be desired than gold or silver

**Opening prayer**

O God, we come seeking wisdom for the way.

Plant the seed of your law in our hearts

Where it may be nourished

With the story of your faithful people

And take root in our lives.

**Prayer of confession**

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Creator God, you have outlined

Ten ways the world could flourish,

Ten ways to have full lives,

Ten ways to respect and honour the earth.

But they have become:

ten ways we’ve failed to live,

ten ways we’ve cheapened life,

ten ways we’ve abused you and others.

We admit to the failure

but we hold to your way of wisdom for the

world.

Enable us to see them as

ten ways to love each other,

ten ways to change the world,

ten ways to open up your realm.

**Assurance of pardon**

God says,

“I forgive you, not ten times,

not a hundred times,

but every time.

Live in my way and make this life better

for the world and for each other.”

Go with ten ways of wisdom for your voyage.

**No other gods**

**no images**

**no swearing**

**no overwork**

**no disrespect.**

Go with ten ways to build a new community.

**No killing**

**no adultery**

**no stealing**

**no lying**

**no jealousy.**

Go with ten ways to live the promises.