**2nd October 2011**

**Focus scripture Exodus 20:1–20**

The government is considering raising the speed limit on our motorways from 70 miles an hour to 80. Proponents of the change say that most people ignore the 70 limit at the moment and the law is virtually unenforceable because everyone breaks it. I have a feeling that should the speed limit be raised to 80 everyone will start doing 90! For some people rules are meant to be broken. The attitude is that ‘no one tells us what to do’.

Part of the outcry against our membership of the European Community is not only to try and get out of the sinking ship, or the house on fire that has no doors as William Hague put it, but because we don’t like ‘foreigners’ telling us what to do – whether it’s how straight our bananas should be or how much cocoa should be in our chocolate.

Today’s reading picks up the story of the Hebrews’ escape from Egypt, where they had been held as slaves. Moses, the leader appointed by God, takes delivery of the Ten Commandments as he is leading them through the wil­derness of the Sinai region to God’s land of promise.

The original form and Hebrew language in Exodus 20 suggest that the commandments first may have been simply a list of ten words – murder, idolatry, adultery, and so on. These words were shorthand for a rule of life to guide the people of Israel along their journey to becoming the nation that was promised to Abraham.

Before I left my college training for ministry I had to share with my tutor about my rule for life. It included tings like how I would spend my money, how I would spend my time, what were the priorities for my life, how I would live out my Christina faith. It is a good exercise for any one to do. They say that if you don’t live by your priorities you live by the pressures on you.

The Ten Commandments summarize God’s rule for life. In the first commandment (this is not a hobby or a past time – the first commandment) we are told to acknowledge God as God alone, and are called to honour our relationship with God. In the commandment regarding Sabbath, we are told to match the rhythm of our lives with God’s own rhythm. In the remaining commandments, God’s loving wisdom lays out how to live so that our relationships with other people reflect God’s relationship with us.

Protestant theologian Martin Luther (1483–1546) taught that every negative in this list implies a positive. For example, “do not kill” implies “support the living.” The commandments offer a vision of the world that God promises to bring to fulfilment. Indeed the Hebrew word for ‘You shall not’ could equally be translated as ‘you will not’ implying a change in desire and outlook as one’s relationship with God changes from rebellion (no one tells me what to do) to friendship (please guide me and show me how to live well and abundantly).

Desire is the key. Relationship is the key. Rules without relationship will always be legalistic and lead to defiance.

There is the old joke about Moses coming back down the mountain and saying to the Israelites:

‘I’ve got some good news and some bad news. The good news is that I’ve managed to keep God down to Ten Commandments. The bad news is that adultery is still one of them’

Rules within relationships will be about agreeing the best way to live together well.

I haven’t got time to go through all the Ten Commandments. I just want to focus on the last one.

*You shall not covet your neighbour’s house; you shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.*

Coveting is not a word that we use much today. Yet the concept of wanting what is not ours to have is well known. Listen to some of these popular sayings:

*The closest to perfection a person comes is when they fill out a job application.*

*The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.*

*People live in tow tents: content and discontent.*

*However long you take agonizing over the menu deciding which sweet to have, when the next person’s dessert arrives, you realise you made the wrong choice.*

*Our yearnings will always exceed our earnings.*

Whether it is desserts, clothes, houses, salaries, talents, lifestyles or cars, we want what other people have.

We all have different desires. It would be a boring world if we all had the same tastes. Yet while our desires are different, what we all have in common is that we all want what we haven’t got.

Not all desire is wrong of course. Some of our deepest desires are for good things: pleasure, joy, happiness, security, adventure, justice, peace. We want to be well respected, loved, and significant, to have meaning in our lives.

Yet from the moment we were born our desires are being moulded and shaped by the world around us. The advertising industry would be OK if all it did was inform the public. But too often they clearly set out to manipulate existing desires and create new ones. Soon we start to believe that the fulfilment of those good desires to be loved, respected, to belong, is to be found by obtaining things. We want to be content, but we think that the only way of achieving this is by acquiring things we don’t already have. We have started coveting – having an illegitimate or wrongful desire for something that, for whatever reason, is not ours to have.

The result is the mess we are in.

We are a nation of people who desire what we haven’t got, whether it be fridges or food, bank balances or brains, wives or families, houses or lifestyles. We are never satisfied. Which is why our national pastime is shopping. Which is why our economy and political structure is in bondage to the idea of growth. And of course it’s the reason why there is so much debt. Debt used to be the problem we campaigned for developing countries to be released from. Now the problem lies with us in the developed world.

There was a city trader who was interviewed on the BBC this week who said governments don’t rule the world Goldman Sachs (the banks) do. Financial institutions do seem to be terrifying governments at the moment and this is a very dangerous moment in our history. Greed can sink us all unless it is checked. The workings of financial capitalism depend on greed and fear as its instincts and must by definition attract and foster personalities who are involved in this sphere. It is scary that these individuals are in control. Ask most people how hedge funds work and they couldn’t give you a clear answer. We don’t understand what controls us. Greed is in control and desires which are not God given become demonic and lead to destruction.

But you may argue – desire is hardly a heinous crime compared to murder or stealing. It’s not against the law to covet. What’s the big deal?

It’s true that nobody has been sent down for the crime of coveting. However you don’t have to look too closely to see the effect that wrong desires have on people’s actions. We might not turn all our desires into actions, but all our actions are the result of our desires. For example every theft starts with someone’s desires to have something that they have no right to have. Every act of adultery begins with someone’s desire for a person they are not married to. Once we recognize the place that desire has in actions, we get to deal with what is underneath the surface. We see the root spiritual battle – we can be tempted with wrong desires that could bring us to harm and destruction.

So what is the antidote? What is the better way?

Well – go back to the beginning of the Ten Commandments. We all have God given desires – to be loved, to feel worthwhile, to belong, to feel secure. However instead of trying to find fulfilment for them by going to our Creator God, the God who made our hearts and their desires, we go elsewhere.

For example the desire to feel significant is a good God given desire. Its real fulfilment lies in knowing that we are loved children of our heavenly father. But for many people, the desire to feel significant comes in wearing the right label or driving the right car, or having the right job.

Martin Luther the great Christian Reformer said our basic human problem was that our hearts ‘curved in on themselves’. We are too self obsessed. The commandments are clear and summarised by Jesus –‘Love God, and love your neighbour as you love yourself’. The key antidote to coveting is to ***uncurve the heart*** – to get beyond your own self –to open up to God and your neighbour.

Be aware of the dangers. Take every thought captive at that initial stage - when desires forms in the heart – is this a God given given desire? If not be on guard. Prayerfully do that spiritual work in the conscious presence of God – ask the Holy Spirit to sift you.

**2. See through the illusion**.

If we need to keep on our guard about covetousness we also need to keep reminding ourselves that it is based on an illusion. It promises contentment and fulfilment, yet few, if any, of the things that we covet bring us either. Certainly neither fame nor riches deliver what they promise. Ironically this is something we know deep down. Spectacular tales of quarrels, depression and suicides have resulted from big lottery wins.

I watched the film Social Network last week about Mark Zukerberg a computer nerd at Harvard University, who set up Face book and became the youngest billionaire in the world. The subtitle of the film is ‘you don’t get to 500 million friends without making a few enemies’. The film portrayed a very wealthy and clever individual but a very sad and lonely one.

Someone has suggested shouting ‘who are you kidding’ at the adverts on the TV. Certainly we need to be aware of the underlying message and especially teach our children how the media generally and adverts in particular – seek to manipulate our desires and confuse us over what we want and what we really need and how we should behave.

Above all we need to remember that things are temporary. They are not real riches. See through the illusion.

**3. Realize the fear that feeds covetousness.**

Johnny Carson is the host of the Tonight Show on American TV. Once he made a joke about there being a toilet paper shortage in the city.   
  
The next day there really was a shortage because all the viewers who had watched his show ran out afterward and bought up extra toilet paper just in case. There was no trust in the fact that people, if they chose to work together, could ration out the toilet paper to make sure there would be enough for everyone. People panicked and grabbed not what they needed, but more than they needed, leaving others with nothing at all.

When we face the future we need to look to something for hope. Things, especially money, offer apparent security. In our fear, we focus our hopes and confidence on things, not on God. We take our life into our own hands and in doing so find we have taken our life out of his. If we knew God better, I believe we would be less tempted to be afraid. And that would cut at the root of covetousness.

**4. Cultivate contentment**. The old saying the grass is greener on the other side isn’t automatically true. The problem is that often we have been watering it. Maybe it’s time to start watering our side of the fence. Keep your heart in shape. By which I don’t just mean eat well and exercise. Keep your spiritual heart healthy. Never mind the five fruit and veg you are supposed to get down you everyday (one of our secular ten commandments). The five vital ingredients for the spiritual life is pray, read scripture, be in fellowship with other believers, worship and witness in word and deed.

Adopt an attitude of gratitude. Coveting does not lead to contentment, only dissatisfaction with what we already have. Contentment stops the cycle. A major part of contentment is having a positive attitude to the situation we are in.

Tomorrow we celebrate the life of Ron Jones who for me epitomised a positive frame of mind. He was definitely ‘the glass is half full’ type of person. His positivity gave others confidence to try new things and make a difference. When he was diagnosed with cancer Ron didn’t complain but was thankful for all he had and stayed faithful and positive right to the end.

Every now and again it is important to stop and just be thankful for all that we do have in life. An attitude of gratitude. I learnt this lesson many years ago whilst out in the African Bush and sat down to a meal of bean soup with a group of Ugandans. The bean soup had protein in it - a number of weevils and beetles had crawled into the cooking pot and been boiled alive. A quick stir of the soup bowl revealed their fortifying presence. *Bean soup with added insects*- it would look good on the label! Everyone bowed their heads and gave such heartfelt thanks to God for providing daily food that this one pampered westerner was deeply humbled.

God calls us to be thankful for what we have. But also we are called to **(5.)** **be**  **wise stewards**. One can argue whether we have done anything to deserve what we have when we know the world is a grossly unfair place and where you are born will determine your life’s chances. At best, we are loaned out our wealth for a little while. What we are loaned is God’s and we are accountable for our use and abuse of his property.

**6. Focus on relationships, not things**. In the pursuit of riches, things and fame that covetousness produces, people can pay the price. In the race for prosperity, people are easily crushed in the rush. Children and families can be sacrificed on the altar of overtime. Friends can fall by the wayside because of our desires for possessions and power. God’s call is to love people and use things. Not the other way round. Are our relationships our number one priority? People matter. After all, they are eternal, things aren’t. Jesus said a person’s life is not measured by what they own. (Luke 12.15)

Finally the best antidote to covetousness is **(7.)** **be a giver**. Be generous with what you have. If you are obsessed with a desire to amass things – the radical surgery to break that bondage is renounce those things – give them away. Jesus talked a great deal about giving. Even in his day people were materialistic and taken up with fear and greed. It is more blessed to give than to receive. Money is not the root of all evil (much misquoted verse). It’s the love of money that is the root of all evil – which is why Jesus told the rich young man to go and sell everything and give to the poor – because his desires were in the wrong place.

Covetousness seems the least deadly of the all the Ten Commandments. It seems the most soft centred one that we can easily live with. Which is why it is so perilous. Before you know, your desires have become distorted and you are heading into a life of discontent and distortion. Uncurve the heart, get your desires right and God given, see through the illusions of this world and the devil’s tricks; leave your fears with God, seek contentment, be wise stewards, focus on relationships not things, and be a giver.

May with Paul, in is letter to the Philippians, you be able to testify that you are content in all circumstances and you are able to face anything through Him who gives you strength.

**Opening prayer**

We gather as those who wonder and wander;we participate and pull back;we are faithful at times and frail at others.

**May life-giving ways be opened for us and within us.**

Some know what it is to struggle,to be broken but not crushed,to despair yet be held by unseen love.

**May life-giving ways be opened for us and within us.**

As a river carries life within its flowing currents,

may we encounter, this day, the Spirit of the One

in whom is life and love for all.

**May life-giving ways be opened for us and within us.**

**Prayer of confession**

*Before they became the ten commandments, the Israelites probably knew them as ten words that served as a rule of life. This prayer option reflects the power of words to create heartfelt responses that give shape to community.*

*Arrange to have four people stand in the four corners of the worship space. The readers will take turns saying one of the words from each of the lists of words of contemplation below. Follow each word with ample silence. Explain that rather than speaking a prayer with prescribed sentences and thoughts, we will hear single words. Invite those gathered to be attentive to the thoughts and feelings that arise with each word and allow these responses to guide a silent prayer of confession.*

**Words for contemplation** distance*,* separation, division, broken-hearted*(give ample pause between each word);*harm, neglect, pollution, extinction*(give ample pause between each word);*disregard, ignore, injustice, impoverish*(give ample pause between each word).*

**Words of affirmation** *Have the four people who read the words for the prayer of confession continue reading the words below slowly, but without the extended space for silent prayer.*

Hear now these life-giving words:

receive, welcome, reconcile, enfold; restore, conserve, beautify, care;

attend, share, compassion, love; forgiven, forgiven, forgiven, forgiven.

May these words take root within us and become the living reality among and through us.

**Directions**

The commandments helped shape the people of Israel to grow as a community who loved God.

1. Read the ten loving ways from the Exodus story one at a time.

2. In pairs, or in small groups, make a shape or statue of what each loving way might look like.

3. Hold the pose so all can see, or prepare to show the full congregation.

**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.