

A New Commandment

“I give you a new commandment.: love one another, even as I have loved you so you are to love one another.”

This is obviously an important statement. A new commandment from the founder of our religion. Were Jesus to have lived in this media conscious age, we can imagine the treatment it would have had. Theological correspondents on both the ABC and the commercial channels would have given informed guesses as to what the new commandment would be; there would have been debates between the leader of the Sanhedrin, the Pharisees and the followers of John the Baptist, the Galilean Times would have had a leading article and after the commandment had been promulgated Darryn Hinch and John Faine would have challenged Peter and John and obtained the woman’s view from Mary Magdalene.

And yet in a few minutes we shall all say the Nicene Creed together - and there isn’t a word about this commandment in what is intended to be the official statement of our beliefs as Christians. Not a word about this new commandment, the Sermon on the Mount, Christ’s teachings on our behaviour, not a single word . Why?

Let’s start again. If we discuss our Christian religion with non-believers one of the commonest arguments we hear is that it is perfectly possible to be a good Christian without going to church or believing in such magical nonsense as the Incarnation, the Virgin Birth, Resurrection etc. That Christianity is concerned with leading a good life and loving one another. A sort of glorious idealistic form of a socialistic paradise.

It's rubbish I know, but it is a very common attitude towards our religion. Let's take it to pieces and in the course of this see why we don't have Christ's teaching enshrined in our creeds. First, I think Christians themselves should be allowed to say for themselves what their beliefs are. Then what is the motivation that makes others follow particular rules for behaviour? Because they make sense, because they are right? Because conscience tells us? Once you start talking about conscience you are very near to what a Christian would call the Holy Spirit.

The link, the vital link that changes Jesus's teachings from any other wise man's is the claim that he is God. That frightening, outrageous claim that God visited his people in the form of the human being we call Jesus is the doctrine of the Incarnation. The Christian faith hangs on this and the possibility of redemption by the death of Jesus.

Then, you see, we not only have the attraction that the moral code is God-given, but also that God has given us not only the possibility of following his laws but also the possibility of forgiving us if we fail. Our beliefs, our religion, our Christianity tell us why we should have faith in Christ. It is because he is God. God so loved the world that he gave us his only Son.

Jesus gives us this New Commandment to his family at the Last Supper in the upper room as he awaits his death. At that last meal he took bread and broke it and gave it to them saying that it was his body. In that prayer of consecration we announce our faith, the mystery of faith 'Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.' It is this fantastic claim that Jesus the human being, the historical figure of the Gospels, was God that makes

Christianity so different from Buddhism, Islam or Socialism. That is why belief in the incarnation and the redemption it provided is so vital. St Paul gave the basic simple creed for the early Christians in his letter to the Romans 'If on your lips is the confession "Jesus is Lord" and in your heart the faith that God raised him from the dead, then you will find salvation'. Simple, isn't it? But of course, our more modern creeds say a lot more than that - some things in the list are more important than others. Don't omit the possibility that they may be fallible, for they were formulated over hundreds of years by ordinary people who made no claim for infallibility, but we accept that these ordinary people were guided by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, one of the gaps in our creeds is that there is no mention of the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to guide Christ's Church. But one sentence in the Creed that is very apposite this morning is 'We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins', This morning we have a baptism - an extraordinary event. It is the prime example of the way in which the creeds unite us. The sacrament of baptism is recognised and admitted as valid in almost all our disparate churches, almost without exception - Anglican, Roman, Uniting, Orthodox and most others.

Perhaps you can now see why we make no mention of Jesus's teaching in our creeds nor any mention of his life - only of his birth and death. Once you accept the incarnation, the crucifixion and the resurrection as historical facts, then the rest must follow. Christianity is a theological religion not a moral one. And once we believe that, then we shall follow the new commandment 'Love one another. As I have loved you so you are to love one another'.

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