

Commandments

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An anonymous saying states 'Children: you spend the first two years of their life teaching them to walk and talk. Then you spend the next sixteen years telling them to sit down and shut up.' I have to say that as we brought up four children in fairly quick succession there is a certain amount of truth in that saying. You soon find that chaos reigns unless you formulate some rules. We had a roster for washing up, drying, laying the table, clearing the table and so on. Fixed hours to go to bed and to watch TV and so on. And there were punishments as well; complicated rules about payments for babysitting depending on good behaviour. Perhaps it would be an exaggeration to call all these rules commandments but they were not far off. But sadly the children never learn and one has to keep stressing these rules.

Moses had similar problems. He had led the Israelites out of Egypt across the Red Sea and through the desert and all the way along they had been disobedient, worshipping idols and false gods, rebellious and mutinous, Now he and his God have had enough. God summons Moses up to the top of Mount Sinai to face the fire, the cloud and the earthquake and there God speaks to him and delivers what we know as the ten commandments.

The first words that God speaks are fundamental. 'I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt'. The 'you' is personal; God speaks directly to the listener. These laws are for you, they are not dry dull legal documents but a personal direction to each individual, just as we laid down the law to our children. Sometimes the commandments are criticised because eight of them are negative 'Do not.....' but these commandments open up the limits of behaviour and protect the community from behaviour that might destroy it. The Israelites have been given the Law which their future generations will interpret and which their prophets will use as the basis for their pronouncements. But sadly, the Israelites are like our children; they never learn.

In due course the commandments also provided a moral code for Christians. You may remember that in many churches there were boards hanging on the wall or at the entrance listing the commandments. Jesus, however, condensed the ten commandments into two only. 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it. You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Mtt 22.37.39). Like the original, this was and is a personal direction to the individual to obey.

Not long before Jesus summarised the ten commandments he had related a series of parables which featured vineyards. Now vineyards played a major part in the story of Israel. One of the joys of bringing up children is to reward them when they do obey - when they do 'sit down and shut up'. The Israelites were rewarded with a land flowing not only with milk and honey but also with grapes. One of the joys of coming to Australia some 37 years ago was the pleasure of being able to afford to drink good wine every day. We are a lucky country in this respect. If you visit Europe or the States you will know that you pay double the price for a bottle of rather poor wine. One of the consequences of this is that the standard Aussie dream of owning a farm in retirement is now often changed into planting a vineyard. Several of my retired academic colleagues did this and so do many lawyers.

A vineyard was equally significant to a Jew in Matthew's times. It produced that marvellous bounty of grapes for an agricultural community. The word for vineyard in Hebrew described your beloved in a romantic sense but more importantly it conveyed the image of Israel and the Israelites. In this morning's gospel reading Matthew is really getting his teeth into vineyards as he tells of Jesus's third vineyard parable. We have had the parable of the workers hired during the day, last Sunday the two sons were asked by their father to work in the vineyard and now perhaps the most significant - the parable of the tenants in the vineyard. There used to be some argument as to whether this parable was an original one of Jesus or whether it was one concocted by the gospel writers, but now it is generally recognised as being authentic. Nevertheless, the parable has two meanings, first as Jesus related it to his audience of the time and secondly

as Matthew used it.

Let's go back and join the listeners as Jesus tells the parable. The land over the years has been taken over by large estates and rich landlords, many of whom are absentee landlords so we, the listeners fully understand the background. Perhaps in this period of unrest and protest against Roman rule there has been an incident in which tenants have murdered a land owner, so we listen with considerable topical interest.

Jesus then tells this dramatic story. You can imagine the 'Ohs' and 'Ahs' as the servants and son are successively murdered. When the son arrives, the tenants treat him not with respect but with murderous cunning. 'This son is the heir; perhaps the old man has died. If we kill the heir, we have squatters' rights and will gain the whole vineyard as our own.' This was indeed possible under the laws of the time. Well, the story is very exciting for us as we listen. But now Jesus asks us for a judgment. 'What will the owner do to the tenants when he comes?' We have no hesitation in responding that he will put the tenants to death and lease the vineyard to other tenants. The leaders of the nation, the chief priests and the Pharisees immediately see that the parable is about them. Jesus is accusing them, the tenants of God's vineyard Israel of repeated rebellion against God and so the vineyard will be given to others, probably the poor.

As always in Jesus's parables there is very little use of allegory, other than the vineyard itself, an image so familiar to his hearers. The chief priests and the leaders will not learn nor will they sit down and shut up. When Matthew, however, writes this parable into his gospel he can't resist reinterpreting it in the light of Jesus's death and the situation of the early church which Matthew sees around him. All this is bolstered by the quotation from Psalm 118 (22-23) 'Have you never read in the scriptures "the very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner; this was the Lord's doing and it is marvellous in our eyes."?' Matthew turns the parable into an allegory. The owner is God and he has the son killed outside the vineyard as Jesus was crucified outside the city and the son of the owner becomes Jesus and the other tenants become the Gentiles. Matthew, as did Jesus, also is probably addressing the Christian leaders of his own community. These leaders feel secure as members of this new community which has inherited the kingdom. They also pride themselves in being teachers and guides in that community. Matthew sees how relevant Jesus's parable is to these leaders of his church, the latter day Pharisees. He thinks they need a stern warning. It is not sufficient just to be a member of the correct group or church. The Lord scrutinises leaders with particular care seeking more than labels or slogans. He wants people who will produce the fruits of the kingdom.

So we have a trail from Jesus proclaiming the rights of the poor against the leaders of his day to Matthew exhorting the leaders of his Christian community to produce the fruits of the kingdom rather than just belonging to the right group.

Now not many of us own a vineyard or labour in one. We are not likely to kill visitors to our estate. But perhaps Jesus and Matthew had a point. Are we just content to wear the right label? Do we produce the fruits of the kingdom? Or will the owner of the vineyard lease it to other tenants who will give him the produce at harvest time?

Have we reached the time when we need not sit down and shut up but to stand up and shout?