
Exodus 20: Ten Commandments (Second reading Mark 12:28-34)

The people of Israel have arrived at Mt Sinai and God is in no hurry to let them move on. After all that has happened so far, a covenant is required. Until now there is only the covenant with the one person, Abraham. God is going to formalise the relationship with his people. (If you have any informal relationships, would it be a good idea to formalise them?)

The first thing God does now is to give the people the so-called Ten Commandments. In the original text they are merely called the Ten Words.

These Words reflect their setting: they mention the sabbath, oxen and donkeys. We need to see through this to understand their timeless aspect. If you had all been in church today, I would have put you in small groups to discuss how to state the contemporary meaning of the Ten Words. You should then probably mention cars and smart phones.

Nonetheless, these Words are still incredibly relevant. If only we all followed them! If only multinational companies would not covet what belongs to nations. If only the kings and governments understood that they are subject to them as well. (In Israel the king knew. David was confronted by the prophet Nathan after his adultery and admitted his guilt, 2 Samuel 12.)

Rather than discuss each Word individually, I will make some general points:

1. God is not out to limit us; these rules are truly beneficial. Israel sings about this in e.g. Psalms 19 and 119. Here is life!
2. Four of them are about God, six about fellow humans. Jesus confirms this division in Mark 12. Yet this is not an either/or: we should love both God and our fellow humans.

For modern people it's not enough to 'lead a good life' (= follow the second group of rules), to care for the earth, etc. God should be given first place in everybody's life.

3. The second group of commandments, those about fellow humans, is absolutely essential for any society. Everyone can see this. In Abraham all the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:3) – well, these Words are a blessing from Israel to the world.
4. We still need to think when we apply them. Jesus shows us that it is about the spirit of the law. He uses the example of saving an animal on the sabbath: if your animal falls in a pit on the sabbath, you are allowed to work on that day to save it. Life is more important than the sabbath. Likewise, if you are hiding an innocent person, and someone knocks on your door in search of that person, you are allowed to deny that you have them. Life in this case is more important than speaking the truth.

Exodus shows us that God's grace comes first, followed by his rules for a good life. Israel is first set free from slavery in Egypt – ready to serve God – and then given the Ten Words.

So it should be in families as well: there should be acceptance before any rules are given. And it should be the same in church. People should be welcome to belong before they behave and before they (truly) believe. Obedience not a condition for acceptance but the effect of acceptance.

We see that already in the Old Testament you could not earn your salvation. Abiding by the rules is merely a show of gratitude, not something which earns us anything. But it is an important expression of our gratitude.
