

First Sunday in Lent

February 21, 2010

SERMONS ON EXODUS: XXVI
THE COVENANT WORDS: VI. THE SACREDNESS OF LIFE
(Exodus 20:13)

“Thou shalt not kill.” With this commandment we have reached the halfway point, and from here on the commandments have to do primarily with those relationships without which human society cannot long endure: “Thou shalt not kill,” “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” “Thou shalt not steal,” “Thou shalt not bear false witness,” “Thou shalt not covet.” Rabbi Goldman writes,

What has made these commandments unique is, first, the terseness and conciseness of language. They whiz, as it were, through the air and strike the conscience of man like an arrow its target. Next, is their elasticity, suggestiveness, and wide applicability. They stand before us in absolute form, as axioms and abstractions and as applying to all situations everywhere and at all times. It is these rules that have echoed in the minds of men whenever they have reflected on the sanctity of human life, the sanctity of the family, the wickedness of appropriating what is not ours, the iniquity of character assassination, and the curse of covetousness. “God Almighty hath said in a voice that goeth thundering through the centuries, ‘Thou shalt not.’ Never! Never! Never!”¹

The first of these commandments is, “Thou shalt not kill.” I suspect that if an interviewer approached the average person on the street or in the mall and asked him to name one of the Ten Commandments, many, if not most, would say, “You shall not kill.” It is a sharp and pointed command, of unavoidable directness, and of undeniable pertinence. Its focus is life itself.

But before we examine the commandment and consider its meaning and manifold applications, we should take note of its setting. We all know that the Ten Commandments, the Ten Covenant Words, were inscribed by God on two tablets of stone. We generally assume that the first of these tablets contained the first four commandments, those that focus directly on our relationship with God, and the second tablet the six commandments, beginning with that to honor our parents, that focus on our relationship with our fellowman. That has always been my understanding, as I implied as recently as last Sunday. (I did have a professor of Old Testament

¹ *The Ten Commandments*, p. 181.

in seminary who argued on the basis of other ancient near eastern covenants that all Ten Commandments were inscribed on each tablet, one copy, as it were, for each party of the covenant, in this case Yahweh and Israel.²)

It is worth noting, however, that according to Jewish reckoning there were five commandments on the First Table, the fifth commandment, the commandment to honor parents, being tied to that to honor God in whose economy the parent's role is to raise their children "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord," as St. Paul put it, or *in locus Deus*, so to speak.. On this reckoning, then, "Thou shalt not kill," the sixth commandment, heads the Second Table of the Law, and thus parallels the first commandment which heads the First Table. It is unarguable that the first commandment, to have no other gods, and thus, as Luther said, to 'have' God, is foundational for all the other commands of the First Table. In like manner, the command that forbids the killing of another human being can be seen as foundational for all the other commands of the Second Table. Killing is the worst of the transgressions outlined there for it takes a man's life in its totality, not just his wife or his possessions or his honor, and is absolutely irreversible. A life taken cannot be restored. This division of the commandments fits more neatly into Jesus' twofold Summary of the Law, and underscores the central importance of the sixth commandment.

Understanding this commandment as foundational for the remaining four also helps us to grasp its overall relevance. That the commandment has far-reaching applicability is obvious to most of us. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* begins its treatment of this commandment (number five by Roman Catholic reckoning) by stating the general principle,

Human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves the creative action of God, and it remains for ever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end. God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end: no one can under any circumstance claim for himself the right to destroy an innocent human being.³

The *Catechism* then goes on to deal at some length with the various issues of self-defense, homicide, abortion, euthanasia, suicide, and just war. I strongly commend the *Catechism* to you as a most able treatment of all those issues of the specific application of this commandment. This morning we can only focus on the commandment itself.

We understand that this commandment, though framed in the negative and thus setting the outside boundaries, is intended to have a positive thrust, commanding respect for life, as the *Catechism* stated. As the first commandment, which forbids other gods, is intended to forge our positive relationship

² See Meredith G Kline, *Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy: Studies and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1963).

³ (Ligouri, MO: Ligouri Publications, 1994), p. 554, ¶2258.

to God, so this sixth commandment is intended to forge our positive relationship to life. It is significant that this commandment follows that to honor our father and our mother through whom God has given us life. The same concern for the sacredness of life that is expressed there in the fifth commandment is now seen in the sixth as extending to all human life. Honoring those through whom God has given us life must lead to regard for all those to whom God has given life. We are to love our neighbor *as ourselves*.

It is more than a little disconcerting that this commandment is, as I am now arguing, the first and most fundamental commandment of the Second Table of the Law, for that then implies that the inclination to its violation, the temptation to do away with another human being, is one of the most basic dangers of the natural human heart. Don't we know that from the story of Cain and Abel? That sad story is not meant simply to tell of an isolated incident of long, long ago but to picture for us the ugly reality of the human heart. It is an apt illustration of that against which this commandment warns us. The kind of killing that is the focus of the sixth commandment issues from jealousy and envy, and any thoughts in which, in one way or another, we wish someone out of our way, be it an individual or a class of people or an entire race. Our Lord's treatment of this commandment points to the underlying malice out of which the wretched deed arises: "Ye have heard that it was said to them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment. But I say unto you that whosoever shall be angry with his brother without cause shall be in danger of the judgment" (Mt. 5:21-22). Anger or hatred is the mother of the deed. At the beginning, Cain, angry with his brother without cause, *and with God*, simply wanting his brother out of the way, out of his sight, out of his world, rose up and slew him. Was it premeditated or did the anger suddenly well up inside him when they were out in the field? It matters not, for either way what was at the bottom of it all was that he did not know himself as his brother's keeper; he did not acknowledge that his brother had a claim on his love and care.

And the LORD spoke to Cain and said, "What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground" (Gen. 4:10). It is interesting that the text says, "And *the LORD* said unto Cain." "And Yahweh said unto Cain." This is the name, seldom used in the Book of Genesis, by which God revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush, saying that he had *seen* his people's suffering in Egypt, that he had *heard* their cries and had come to save them. The LORD God, Yahweh, hears the voice of the brother's blood crying from the ground, the blood of the one Cain refused to own as his brother. When we hate, when we disdain, when we disregard him who is our friend, our brother, our neighbor, we are hating, disdain, disregarding him whom God loves, who is made in God's image, into whom God has breathed his own spirit, the breath of life, and whose cries God most certainly hears. We are despising the very image of God. Our blessed Saint John told us that if we do not love our brother

whom we have seen, we cannot love God whom we have not seen (I Jn. 4:20), and our Lord tied our treatment of the poor, needy and despised to our treatment of himself.

“Thou shalt not kill.” ‘Kill’ is too broad a word to translate the Hebrew. The Hebrew language has several general words that signify the taking of the life, the killing, of man or beast, but this is not one of them. Actually the Prayer Book translation is better: “Thou shalt do no murder.” As Brevard Childs explains, “The verb came to designate those acts of violence against a person which arose from personal feelings of hatred and malice. The command in its present form forbids such an act of violence and rejects the right of a person to take the law into his hands out of a feeling of personal injury.”⁴ This ties in with Jesus’ interpretation and points to the malice, either aforethought or suddenly arising, that causes us to hate or despise or disdain our brother, a violation of the love and respect we owe any child of God, even if it does not fully develop into an act of violence. Given this understanding, the commandment does not really apply the killing that is the inevitable, but regrettable, part of a just war or to the necessary killing of animals for food, as should be clear by the whole Old Testament context.

“Thou shalt do no murder.” Many decades ago Henry Sloan Coffin began a sermon on this commandment at the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City by stating, “There is almost an element of humour in preaching against murder to a congregation of respectable people like ourselves. Did we really think that the man in the next pew might possibly be ‘a gunman,’ or the woman across the aisle a prospective prisoner, how very uncomfortable we should feel!”⁵ I think, first, that there is in every human heart, even the most respectable, the capability of the vilest of deeds, but, secondly, that we need to underscore that this commandment is not of relevance to those alone who would actually take a human life. This command heads the list of commandments of the Second Table of the Law and thus points indirectly to our highest obligation vis-à-vis our fellow man, that of love. To the degree that for the sake of our self-interest we deny the other (whoever it may be) a place, we stand in violation of this commandment. All self-centered thoughts, all self-centered politics, all self-interested churchmanship, all inter-human action that fails to see in the other “bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh,” as Adam said of Eve, falls short of the fulfillment of this command.

The awful reality of this commandment is that there is that within the human heart that that wants to “kill” or destroy or get rid of, in one way or another, any one who stands in the way of our self-interest, of our self-fulfillment, of our pleasure, and no where do we see that more clearly than in the crucifixion of our Lord. When his claims, when his teaching, when his truth, were seen to stand in the way of the

⁴ *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, p. 421.

⁵ *The Ten Commandments with a Christian Application to Present Conditions* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1929), p. 113.

human heart's doing whatever it would, the cry went up, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" And they did, . . . we did. We killed him; we shed his blood. But the blood we spilled upon the ground cried out not for vengeance, not for retaliation, not for the punishment of the transgressors, but for their forgiveness. The blood shed by hatred was spilled for our redemption. Human malice was met by divine love. The one who was killed in the most blatant violation of the sixth commandment revealed the kind of love that is its truest fulfillment. It is, praise God, not on Mount Sinai that God's final word is revealed, but on Mount Golgatha, and there we will learn God's way.

Sermon preached by the Rev'd Fr. Voris G. Brookshire at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, FL, on the First Sunday of Lent, February 21, 2010. Copyright © 2010.