

Quinquagesima Sunday

February 14, 2010

SERMONS ON EXODUS: XXV
THE COVENANT WORDS: V. HONOR THY PARENTS
(Exodus 20:12)

Try for a moment to imagine that you are God. I know that seems blasphemous, but hear me out. You have chosen a people, rescued them from slavery and brought them to the holy mountain where they are now gathered in solemn assembly. You want to make this benighted and rebellious people into a priestly and holy nation that they might be the instrument for manifesting your truth to all nations. You have chosen to deliver to them ten words, ten succinct statements, a list of fundamental instructions to serve as the foundation for their enlightenment and formation. You have already delivered four words which teach them how they are to relate to you alone as their Creator, Redeemer and Lord. There are to be six more telling them how to relate to their fellow man. What shall they be? Not to murder, of course. Not to lie. Not to steal. That's three. Not to commit adultery, which is to take another's wife. Not to covet, that is not even to want something that is not yours enough to lie, steal or kill for it. Okay, that's nine. What else is absolutely fundamental for our social well-being? What would you choose? There are many good things one should do to help one's neighbor, caring, loving things: the giving of alms, help for the sick and dying, the nurture and education of children, and so forth; and many evil and hurtful things to be avoided. We wouldn't have any trouble coming up with a long list of 'Thou shalt nots.' And even more pointedly, what shall we choose to head the list of our horizontal obligations, so to speak, and thus to follow immediately on the heels of our four fundamental vertical obligations?

We know what stands in that position in the Ten Commandments, of course, and that to honor one's parents is a good and proper thing, one we often see in practice even in the animal kingdom, and an obligation articulated by almost all the religions of the world. There is clear and strong teaching in Confucius and in Buddhism, even to the point of ancestor worship, and in Egypt, Persia, and most of the ancient world. But the very fact that the rightness of honoring one's father and mother is virtually indisputable might lend force to the argument that it hardly needed to be included in this highly exclusive list at Sinai, much more in the prized position at its

head. We know it's important and not to be gainsaid, but I'm not sure we understand why it's *that* important.

As always, to get to the root of the matter we must look carefully at the text in its context. The first four commandments had to do with our responsibilities in direct relation to God, and these obligations were not just dropped on the shoulders of mankind from out of the blue. They are obligations that, while they might naturally devolve upon us by virtue of the fact that God is the creator and we his creatures, they are in fact preceded by the reminder that God is the *redeemer*. "I am the Lord thy God who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." The commandments, these covenant words, are rooted in God's love and grace, and are to be fulfilled not through abject fear but in answering love. It is the Lord our God, our redeeming covenant God who binds himself to us, that we are to honor and worship. Our obligations are founded in our very being as his children. Our 'whence' determines the nature of our 'whither.'

The same rationale is manifest in the fifth commandment. It is to our parents that we owe our very being in terms of human causality. To them we owe our very existence. However, we are wont by nature to think ourselves self-sufficient, free and independent of others and of God. Was not that the original sin? But we are not. We are bound to the rest of humanity. "*Alle Menschen werden Brüder*," in the words of Schiller sounded so powerfully in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. We are our brother's keeper. We are to love our neighbor as ourselves . . . and our closest human connection, our connection by origin, is to our parents.¹ If we cherish them not, nor honor them, then whom? If we care not for them to whom we owe life, how shall we treat the rest of humankind? As St. Augustine put it, "It is your parents you see when you first open yours eyes, and it is their friendship that lays down the first strands of this life. If anyone fails to honor his parents, is there anyone he will spare?"² Understand this and you will understand why this commandment precedes those that follow.

¹ Gören Larsson notes, "When we ask, 'Who is my neighbor?' the correct answer is 'Anyone who crosses my path.' The commandment of love knows no boundaries. On the other hand, the rule applies that the closer my fellow beings are to me, the greater the responsibility I have for them. Significantly, the Hebrew word for 'neighbor' (*rea'*) is rendered in the Septuagint as well as in the New Testament by the Greek word for 'close' (*plesion*). This translation reflects an important principle regarding the commandment of love: the closer, the warmer" (*Bound for Freedom: The Book of Exodus in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, p. 149).

² *ACCS, OT III*, p. 106.

The fact that the command to honor father and mother follows on the heels of the command to honor God on the Sabbath day, and the fact that these two commandments are the only ones of the ten that are positive, not negative, that are exhortations to do something, not prohibitions, point to the close analogous relationship between God, who is cited in the 4th commandment specifically as the creator, and the parents, who begat and loved, nourished and nurtured, us in this life, who were in a sense, under God, the instruments of our creation. Now I know well that not all parents are equally loving, nurturing and wise, some are not even responsible, others selfish and cruel, but the commandment does not admit of qualification. “Honor thy father and thy mother.” And note, as Brevard Childs explained,

The choice of the term ‘honor’ carries with it a range of connotations far broader than some such word as ‘obey’. [I would insert that St. Paul says children are to ‘obey’ their parents, but he is speaking of small children. This commandment, like the others, is addressed to adults.] To honor is to ‘prize highly’ (Prov. 4.8), ‘to show respect’, to ‘glorify and exalt’. Moreover it has nuances of caring for or showing affection (Ps. 91.15). It is a term frequently used to describe the proper response to God and is akin to worship (Ps. 86.9). Moreover, the parallel command in Lev. 19.3 actually uses the term ‘fear, give reverence to’ (*tîrā’û*) which is otherwise reserved for God.³

Walter Harrelson explored at length the relationship of this command to the preceding and his words are exceedingly relevant:

The connection between the fourth and the fifth commandments may be the clearer if we recognize that the commandment focused on the treatment of aged parents by the mature members of the community. Just as human beings and farm animals need rest from their labors [the 4th commandment], and just as grinding toil does not constitute the only reason for human life and activity, so also human beings do not cease to have worth and significance when the time for their productive working years has run its course. Parents are to be respected and cared for in their time of feebleness, diminished activity, or senility. When they enter upon their “sabbath” rest, they are to be shown respect and honor such as they were shown in the time of their active membership in the community. Interpreted in this way, the commandment then follows well upon that devoted to the regulation of the flow of time. . . .

The requirement to set aside one day out of seven for the cessation of work reminds us that life consists of more than toil, more than the desperate grabbing for food and shelter and goods, more than the finding of security for ourselves and those dependent upon us. The *more* has to do with our having time for reflection

³ *The Book of Exodus, A Critical, Theological Commentary*, pp. 418-419.

on what life is all about, time for one another, time for God. And in the case of the commandment not to dishonor parents, we once again have to do with a life that consists of more than production, more than carrying one's own weight. Life together in the society must be enriched by regular cessation from labor as well as by labor. Life together in the family must be enriched by the care for one another even when that care is often a nuisance. Persons grow old and can no longer carry the share of the family's labors. They cannot simply be discarded, for that would be to curse them, to treat them with contempt, to forget that these very parents once cared for us when we were unable to care for ourselves, and to forget that we shall one day also be dependent upon the care of our children or their surrogates.⁴

There is in *Grimm's Fairy Tales* a rather vivid, if somewhat gruesome, illustration of this point. You should be aware that the original fairy tales are really 'grim', Cinderella's step-sister's, for instance, slice off the side of their feet to try to fit into the glass slipper! It's Joy Davidman that cites this tale:

Once upon a time there was a little old man. His eyes blinked and his hands trembled; when he ate he clattered the silverware distressingly, missed his mouth with the spoon as often as not, and dribbles a bit of his food on the tablecloth. Now he lived with his married son, having nowhere else to live, and his son's wife was a modern young woman who knew that in-laws should not be tolerated in a woman's home.

"I can't have this," she said. "It interferes with a woman's right to happiness."

So she and her husband took the little old man gently but firmly by the arm and led him to the corner of the kitchen. There they set him on a stool and gave him his food, what there was of it, in an earthenware bowl. From then on he always ate in the corner, blinking at the table with wistful eyes.

One day his hands trembled rather more than usual, and the earthenware bowl fell and broke.

"If you are a pig," said the daughter-in-law, "you must eat out of a trough." So they made him a little wooden trough, and he got his meals in that.

These people had a four-year-old son of whom they were very fond. One suppertime the young man noticed his boy playing intently with some bits of wood and asked what he was doing.

"I'm making a trough," he said, smiling up for approval, "to feed you and Mamma out of when I get big."

⁴ Walter J Harrelson, "No Contempt for the Family" in William P. Brown (ed.), *The Ten Commandments: The Reciprocity of Faithfulness*, pp. 239 & 246.

The man and his wife looked at each other for a while and didn't say anything. Then they cried a little. Then they went to the corner and took the little old man by the arm and led him back to the table. They sat him in a comfortable chair and gave him his food on a plate, and from then on nobody ever scolded when he clattered or spilled or broke things.⁵

The point may be crudely made, but it is made. We are to treat others and we would be treated, and this is true above all of the treatment of those to whom we are most closely related.

Now I've already given up any sense of proportionality with regard to the length of quotations from other authors, so I might as well indulge in one more, it is so well put. It is from a formal response to a presentation on the fifth commandment at a Jewish-Christian conference on the Decalogue by Anatheia Portier-Young. Her name doesn't mean anything to me and I am sure not to you, but she speaks like a contemporary prophet when she says,

The particular challenges of honoring parents in their old age are manifold. For some, the remembrance of past wrongs creates a barrier to the practice of charity. For others, the transportation revolution has severed or weakened the "communion between generations," such that extended families rarely share a dwelling and are often separated by great distances. Medical advances enable individuals to live longer despite complex medical problems, which nonetheless may require high levels of care and monitoring. As a result, adult children may feel strained by the demands of caregiving or may withdraw from the relationship entirely. This withdrawal is facilitated by an individualistic ethos, which suggests that aging individuals ought to provide the means for their own care, such that their needs will not impinge on the lives of others, even their children. Further, in a culture that is increasingly driven by the rhythms of production and consumption, individual worth is measured according to potential for either. Members of society who do not promise to contribute to this economy are a liability rather than an asset. Finally, in a culture that privileges what is what is "new" over what is "old," the wisdom of elders is perceived as outmoded and memory as such is undervalued. In an industrialized society the aged are too often demoted from a place of honor to one of dishonor and seclusion. Their dignity may be compromised by a perception of helplessness, by impersonal forms of caregiving, and even by abuse.

These challenges do not diminish the force of the fifth commandment. They are the real context out of which God's prophetic word calls us to lives of obedience and service.⁶

⁵ Joy Davidman, *Smoke on the Mountain: An Interpretation of the Ten Commandments*, pp. 60-61.

⁶ Anatheia E. Portier-Young, "Response to 'Honoring Parents,'" in Roger E. Van Harn (ed.), *The Ten Commandments for Jews, Christians, and Others*, pp. 104-105.

There is no one hearing my voice that does not have parents, alive or deceased, and many of us have children. There is, therefore, no one for whom this commandment does not have great pertinence. Love your parents if they are alive and try to constantly show them that you love them. I know that there are always difficulties in the parent-child relationship, regardless of age. We are different people with different ideas and different ways. Thus is the commandment all the more necessary. It wouldn't have been given if it were natural and easy. We may also have grievances over things past. So learn from our heavenly Father to forgive as we are forgiven. The commandment remains also for those whose parents have passed on. Remember the deceased. Reflect on events and experiences that are now long past. Give thanks to God for them. And, where there are unpleasant memories and difficulties, take them to God and put them behind you. Make peace and be at peace—so that your days may be long and blessed in the land that the Lord your God has given you.

Sermon preached by the Rev'd Fr. Voris G. Brookshire at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, FL, on Quinquagesima Sunday, February 14, 2010. Copyright © 2010.