

October 4th 2026

Trinity 18

**10.30am Holy Communion and Baptism All Saints
Oakham**

*Exodus 20.1-4, 7-9, 12-20, Philippians 3.4b-14, Matthew
21.33-46*

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer.

As you will know, for the last few months we have been reading through the Old Testament accounts of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, leading on to the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and their prolonged wondering in the wilderness. These events took place over a period of around 600 years, and in last week's reading we find them as basically a disorganised mob, at odds with their leaders and moaning continually about their current state, with not enough food and water. Coincidentally it is now about 600 years since the Church of England was founded and one is tempted to draw parallels. But we have read in the last few weeks that God provided the wondering Israelites with food and water through miraculous means. In our reading today, we read how God gave them something more – the law code that we know as the Ten Commandments. During the Victorian period, there was a fashion for putting these words in prominent places on the walls of churches, and we are no exception – our Ten Commandments board is in the south transept to my left. These days, the commandments don't form a terribly important part of our worship and aren't generally at the forefront of our consciousness, although perhaps they ought to be.

In their original context then, the commandments were given to a disorganised and quarrelsome nomadic group of people to give a broad regulation to their religious and social life, but they have become much more than that. The first three commandments have formed the basis of the religious life of all the Abrahamic faiths down through the millennia, and the others, that relate to society and individuals within it, formed the basis of many law codes and in particular those of the Anglo-Saxons, and indeed form the rock on which our current system of laws stands. The effects of the commandments have been long lasting indeed.

One way of looking at the commandments then, which I have often heard used in the past, is that the first three have a vertical direction, from humanity up to God, whilst the other seven have a horizontal direction, governing relations between each of us. So let's, very briefly, consider them in that way. The first three commandments are

I am the Lord your God..... you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol....

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God,.....

In the first, we find, as so often in scripture, an echo of the divine name given to Moses - Yahweh – I am what I am. The one who always was and who always will be. And the commandment simply says that our spiritual allegiance should be to that God, and to no other. The Israelites were surrounded by tribes with other, more limited gods (and the Old Testament does not deny their power and existence) and to idols, human creations representing those anther gods, but the commandment directed them to something greater. And the same holds for us, although our gods and idols take different forms - in subservience to national and ethnic ideologies, to political parties and systems, to the economic and social systems that keep us in material prosperity but hold us in spiritual and moral captivity. But the commandment still holds.

I am the Lord your God..... you shall have no other gods before me. ... You shall not make for yourself an idol....

Taking the name of the Lord in vain, using the name of God as an expletive or an exclamation, is now widespread and its use elicits no surprise. But to use the name of God, and specifically the name that is contained in the words Jesus – which means Yahweh saves, in such a way should be shocking for us, as it simply dishonours the one who demands our worship and allegiance.

But what of the other commandments? I will come onto the fourth and the tenth is a bit, but the fifth to the ninth are the basic for our societal arrangements. The fifth

Honour your father and your mother

was clearly important to the nomadic existence of the Israelites as the extended family was the basis if their entire social organisation, and was aimed at ensuring inter-generational harmony. For good or ill, the family is less important today, but nonetheless is still the bedrock of our society, and the commandment speaks to us of the need to live in love and peace with our relatives, friends and neighbours in a wider sense. Then the sixth to the ninth commandments.

You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

Again, these are the very basis of our laws – no society can function properly where there is violence, especially violence that leads to death; where marriage is regularly undermined; where individuals goods are not secure, and where lies and slander prevail.

Now, the complaint is often made that the commandments are very negative, simply prohibitions and rules. And yes, that is the case. I have suggested though that they are the basis needed for families, groups and societies to function. But they are more than that I think. They are ultimately aimed at giving a structure where individuals and groups can flourish and are aimed at our well being. That is clear enough from the commandments not to kill, steal, commit adultery and lie, but the two I haven't mentioned so far are also important. The fourth

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.

In its essence, this commandments is all about balance, between work and rest, between our own human activities and the importance of worship. And the concept of balance, of seeking harmony in our lives, which is well recognised in secular as well as religious terms, is so important in allowing us to flourish as human beings. And the last, the tenth

You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

It is written in archaic terms of course – we no longer have slaves, or oxen or donkeys – but the principle is clear. Desiring something that belongs to someone else is destructive of inner peace, and can only lead to strife. Again, consciously avoiding covetousness is a way towards individual flourishing.

So the ten commandments as we have them, give us the basis of how and who we should worship, and how we should live our individual and common lives, and present a way in which we can all model our lives for our own well being. Not a bad set of instructions for a baptism. But there are a couple of other things that need to be said.

Firstly, the ten commandments were developed over the coming centuries into a very complex Jewish Law code. But they were also summarised. In the book of Deuteronomy we read a summary of the first three commandments.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might

And in Leviticus what is effectively a summary of the last seven

....you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord.....

Centuries later, Jesus brought these together in words that we have already used this morning in our confession.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

The prohibitions of the commandments, the “shall nots” have been transformed into something much more positive – love of God and love of neighbour. Jesus also went on to radically reinterpret and broaden some of the commandments. For example

‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

This is a verse which I suspect makes many squirm a bit. Much of the New Testament is devoted as to how Christians should regard the Jewish law, based on the ten commandments. My point here is that there is much more to say about how we should interpret the commandments on the light of Jesus’ teaching. That is not for now, even if only for the sake of Alicia and her parents, but there is a lifetime of study there.

Secondly, I think the commandments tell us something about meaning, the plot and purpose of God’s will for us. The Old Testament preacher and philosopher begins the book of Ecclesiastes with the words.

“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless!, Everything is meaningless.”

And continues on in the same vein throughout the book. He was a jolly soul. And after exploring all sorts of activities and philosophies, he comes back to the same words, that all is meaningless, but finally concludes

Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind.

In so far as he can find meaning, a point to life, he finds it in the commandments of God. Now I am certain that God has an eternal purpose for creating the world and for creating humanity, and a reason for redeeming it through the death and resurrection of Jesus, that extends beyond simply getting us into heaven, and it is tempting to speculate what that might be. But, however we speculate, we won’t know any more for certain this side of the grave. But the commandments give us the outline of a pattern for living that will ultimately prepare us, make us ready, to take our part in his fuller purposes that will be revealed to us.

So in the commandments we find the principles for ordering societies and for our own flourishing and well being, but also the basis of Jesus’s teaching calling us to love God and to love our neighbour, and I would suggest the way to prepare for whatever comes beyond the grave. They are well worth pondering more fully.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen