

## Easter 6

*If you keep my commandments you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love.* *John 15.10*

Much so-called Christian morality has surprisingly little to do with Jesus' recorded teachings.

Some theologians have suggested that this is because all such parameters of human behaviour were in the past guaranteed by authority, preferably supra-human authority. They were part of 'systems of command', which was how all human societies functioned. But most people no longer accept that a command from an alleged superior is enough reason to do or think anything, not least because we now know too much about them. That is progress in human development. But it requires us to rethink the basis of morality and ethics. Even Roman Catholics mostly no longer accept that a distant leader should determine all their behaviour. In this deeply protestant country that refusal to kiss the pope's toe has been going on for centuries. Yet we can't work out every single issue from first principles ourselves. If we also can't default to convenient commands, the alternative, offered by Jesus, is that we are empowered think things through with God guided by gospel principles, the ethics of God's Kingdom.

Some moral philosophers completely outside the faith such as Derek Parfit, have argued that there are objective moral truths. He wrote that some things are simply right and others simply wrong: human development has led us to grasp them and hold them in common (it being unique to humankind to concern ourselves with this question). For Parfit some things are true just as numbers are true. The number 2 always denotes the same truth. It just is (there are probably some theoretical physicists and higher mathematicians who disagree, but humour me). Parfit's first in a series of books, *On What Matters*, sought to explain why he believed these things 'really matter'. They perhaps mattered even more to him, with a wholly materialist and God-free view, than to us, who believe that if we get things wrong God can still put them right.

Most Christians would agree with Parfit that certain things are objectively right and wrong, even without some external system of command, but we might be hazier about why unless we are fundamentalist literalists. As a start we could characterize the basis of Christian morality as having regard, e.g., to principles of generosity, consent and the avoidance of harm which can be shown from what Jesus actually taught, rather than the alleged systems of divine command in which some Christians seem still to believe, despite the New Testament. It is interesting, to me anyway, that in Mark, the earliest account of Jesus' teaching, the word 'law' does not occur.

Yes, we heard the words 'command' and 'commandment' several times in today's gospel, but this is not merely, as Jesus calls it elsewhere, a 'new commandment', but a new *type* of commandment. It requires our engagement and imagination; it isn't a simple propositional rule. Jesus didn't give many direct commands; when he did, they were large principles, as in today's gospel ('love one another'), rather than the minutiae of how to live correctly, let alone whom to exclude. His Sermon on the

Mount, which Matthew offers as the teaching of the new Moses, is not cast in the form ‘thou shalt *not*’, but ‘blessed *are* the meek, the poor in spirit, the merciful...’

Jesus taught by describing the world as God sees it: ‘the Kingdom of God is like this’. If, as a Christian (and therefore a citizen of heaven rather than a mere earthly patriot), we see the world through God’s lens then we do have an indicative guide to ethics and morality. But because Jesus taught in this way it is never safe to rely on specific chapter and verse commands, or prohibitions, often intruded into the gospel texts by anxious commentators rather than spoken by him. We are called to immerse ourselves in the teachings of the Kingdom and seek a trajectory of goodness, of Godliness, the view of the world as it could be if all accepted God’s vision of it. Generosity, consent and avoidance of harm are core elements of that. This is, precisely, *Godly* morality: not because God *commands* it, but because he invites and seeks our flourishing, safety and ultimate good: the Kingdom of God *is like this*.

When a scribe asks Jesus, ‘Which commandment is the first of all?’ he replies, ‘love God whole-heartedly and love your neighbour as yourself’ (Mark 12.28-34): this sums up the Jewish moral tradition in which he and the scribe have both been schooled; he answers the question as put by looking beyond systems of command. Jesus’ ethic, Christian ethics or morality, is described by this ‘new’ commandment.

As I said, throughout today’s gospel we hear the language of command and commandment, but Jesus grounds his answer in the overarching truth of love, which is simple but not easy. In this love we apprehend the unity of God: the two commandments are really one. God’s uniting love is relational and responsive: ‘as the Father has loved me so I have loved you’; ‘love one another as I have loved you.’ Jesus enacted that in washing his disciples’ feet and above all on the cross (‘no one has greater love than this...’).

To put that another way, this is a change from two to three dimensions, from words on a page to the Word of God, the person to whom we continue to relate in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. The incarnation, God coming among us as one of us, alters everything.

As we heard this morning this leads to a new relationship with God – not servants but ‘friends’ φίλοι (*philoï*). This is not quite friendship as we usually understand it (as the one-way ‘choosing’ shows). Raymond Brown more accurately translates ‘you are the ones I love’: *philoï* are people loved by the speaker; the word is used of spouses and family members as well as preferred associates, and so, in the Kingdom, brothers and sisters.

The only *command* in Jesus’ morality is to love one another. We are called to work out the detail with God ourselves, as brothers and sisters, beloved siblings of Christ.