

Does Thanksgiving really fit with the Ten Commandments? I think it does.

Today in Canada we are giving thanks for our national heritage, even while we admit that not everything is perfect. Like the Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus proclaimed had “drawn near”, Canada is a work in progress. We can be proud of and thankful for many things in Canada today, such as our commitment to freedoms of assembly, speech, and religion. We espouse equality, universal education, and freedom from discrimination. We have a social safety net in terms of CPP and OAS, universal health care, EI, and so on. But there are still people in Canada who are poorly housed, hungry, or live in fear of domestic and other violence, and we have not yet healed the breach of trust with our First Nations. Despite these failings, most of us are extremely fortunate to live in this beautiful country, upon which people from many other parts of the world can only look in envy.

In our Old Testament reading, Moses is given the Ten Commandments. Some years ago I read a survey taken among Evangelical Christians – those who claim the Bible as their principal guide to right living. On average, they could name about five of the ten. Without wishing to embarrass anyone, you might try to count how many of them you can remember, having just had them read to you! “Back in the day” of course, an Anglican church such as St. George’s would have had the Ten Commandments posted prominently on a board at the front of the church.

Four of the Ten Commandments are about God, and six are about relating to other people (the five “Thou shalt not” commandments, plus the demand to honour your parents). Together, they explain why Jesus said that the *shema* “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbour as yourself” was the summary of the Old Testament: “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

By Jesus’ time, society had moved on from the days of the Ten Commandments. That explains why Jesus said, in the Sermon on the Mount, “You have heard it said thus (concerning such things as murder and adultery) but I say something different ...” Hence it is not heretical to ask, “How are the Ten Commandments relevant today?” How do they play out in our own lives? I don’t suggest that we should ignore them and undertake an orgy of murder and adultery. Nor should we take the Ten Commandments all legalistically or moralistically. Instead, we must ask how to use them for thinking about the kinds of ethical issues that impinge on our lives today.

The four commandments about God are: no other gods before me, no graven images, no blasphemy, keep the Sabbath. “No other gods before me.” In Moses’ day, the issue was the large number of Canaanite gods competing for worship by the Israelites. The wording of this Commandment is not “no other gods” but “no gods ahead of me.” At that time, the Israelites were not yet monotheistic (only one god). Through Moses, God commanded them to be monolatrous (their God the #1 god); it was a way station on the road to monotheism. Commandment #2 amplified this idea. No graven images. Other gods existed as statues or images in temples. The Israelite God was to be revered as far greater than a mere idol. In our own day the temptation is to worship different kinds of idols than graven images – money, consumer goods, status, prestige,

and so on. We may not actually worship the 60 inch TV or the SUV, but we might well worship the pursuit of the money with which to buy them. And we might put such an idol ahead of God.

In the same way, I don't think that taking the Lord's name in vain really means not saying "O God" (or worse) when I drop a brick on my foot. Rather, blasphemy is to use God's name maliciously – to insist that I know God's will perfectly, and if you don't agree, you are an unbeliever or an apostate. This is arrogance rather than faith. In this earthly life, I cannot know God's opinion about ethical issues like gay marriage or abortion or assisted suicide. I can only try to act ethically as best I can, and hope that if I get it wrong, God will look kindly on the fact that I tried my best.

The origin of the Sabbath as set out in Genesis Chapter 2 was for a day of rest from labour. It meant a break from 12 hour days, seven days a week. The need for rest and leisure has renewed significance in a world where many workers are expected to be in touch with the office 24/7. But Sabbath doesn't have to be Sunday. For those who must work on Sunday, another day is just as good a Sabbath – in fact, most full time ministers take time off on Mondays, having led church services on Sundays. We all need what might be called Sabbath time – down-time; rest. But to those who would advocate bringing back Sundays with everything closed, as it was when I first came to Ontario, Sabbath rest means freedom from work, and includes leisure. For people who now work (say) 40 hour work weeks, not twelve hours a day, seven days a week, Sabbath time could reasonably include grocery shopping on the way home from church or enjoying a Blue Jays game on Sunday afternoon. [See the article in this month's *Niagara Anglican* entitled 'Sheila, Jackie, and Sunday baseball'.]

In their day, the five "Thou shalt not" commandments offered a new way of living – the start of civilised society. No murders, no adultery, no stealing, no lying, and no covetousness (meaning, greed). To realize what an advance they represent, think back to the Book of Genesis, which is full of blood-thirsty stories, cheating, and sex. Jacob cheats Esau out of his birthright. Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery and tell their father he was killed by a wild animal. Lot's daughters get their father drunk and sleep with him to get themselves pregnant. It's as racy as any modern soap opera. Significantly, in none of these stories does it seem that the malefactors get punished. Genesis represents a time of complete anarchy; the Ten Commandments usher in the beginnings of the rule of law. God's revelation continues in our day with the continuing evolution of our laws, and our modern demands for equality among people, human rights, the social safety net that I mentioned earlier.

To return to my first point – do the Ten Commandments say anything to us about Thanksgiving?

Yes. This weekend, we give thanks for Canada, for the laws and freedoms that we have, and for the men and women who worked and advocated to make these laws and freedoms possible. The Ten Commandments represent the first step towards what we take as axiomatic today, in a society that was then lawless and anarchic. We therefore offer thanks, too, for those pioneers of ancient Israel who set us on the path towards modern Canada, as well as for the Canadian women and men today and in the future who will continue the work of making our country even more just and equitable than it is today.