

NO IDOLS

Exodus 20. 1-17

1 Corinthians 1. 18-25

John 2. 13-22

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Today, our appointed Old Testament reading introduces us to the Ten Commandments. The fact that we call them ‘commandments’ is a bit strange, given that in Hebrew, they are not called ‘commandments’, but are called ‘words’. The first verse of our text tells us, ‘Then God spoke all these *words*’. We have these commandments because God has spoken to us.

Commandments come out of a relationship that is marked by speaking. If God did not care about us enough to speak to us, there would be no commandments. And conversely, if God did care enough about us to speak to us, it means that God wants us to relate to him and to be changed by him. The words of God are meant to transform us.

The change that God’s words make to humans is often called liberation. God sets us free from our merely human existence, and frees us to live with him and alongside him. The fact that God does indeed speak to us is the best news ever. His ten ‘Words of Life’ are good news.

We do not have time to explore all of the Ten Commandments in one sermon. Today, I would like to focus simply on the following Word: ‘You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them.’

St Stephen's Church is full of images and statues: stained glass windows and paintings depicting heroes of the faith and saints of the Church; statues of our Lady in the Lady Chapel, and of St Stephen next to the Chancel; and other stained glass windows and crucifixes that represent Christ crucified. Visitors sometimes come in to this church and ask innocently, 'Why does St Stephen's have all these images? Doesn't the Bible prohibit them?'

Now we all understand that God will not have anything come between ourselves and him. The holy scriptures prohibit idolatry, in a strong voice beginning with Moses and running right through the prophets. Idolatry occurs when we replace God with something else, and this 'something else' can be the work of human hands. As Psalm 115 puts it, 'Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; they make no sound in their throats. Those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them' (115. 4-8).

Then why do we not hire a demolition crew to come in here, and smash and remove all the images? Why are we doing everything we can to restore our beautiful William Morris stained glass windows? Because we believe in, and love Jesus; and we want everything around us in this church to promote the worship of Christ, our Lord and our God.

Let's start with Moses himself. In the same book of Exodus which gives us the Ten Commandments, there are also other commandments, in chapters 25 through 29, concerning the making of a number of things: the ark of the covenant and the tabernacle containing the Ten Commandments; the sanctuary curtains; the images of the cherubim over the ark; and the priestly vestments including the sacred lots Urim

and Thummim in the priest's breastplate and the stones symbolising the Twelve Tribes.

There are the ceremonial instructions for sacrifice, changing of garments, and burning incense. These various symbols (one could call some of them images) were developed following God's coming down from heaven, down to the top of Mount Sinai, down to speak with Moses and write the Ten Commandments; and down to dwell with, converse with, and lead Israel from bondage in Egypt to life in the Promised Land. 'You shall be my people, and I shall be your God; you shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.' This is a relationship that was established by the living God.

That relationship was fulfilled in the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Word-made-flesh who dwelt among us and whose glory the apostles saw and preached, bringing it to us. Ever since, the Church has made various symbols and images, or icons, of the wonderful mysteries of Christ and of his servants the saints. Are these the graven images and the idols that are prohibited by the scriptures?

The Seventh Ecumenical Council of the Undivided Church, East and West, held at Nicaea in 787 AD, upheld, against the violence of iconoclasts, the veneration of icons, images, and other symbols of the faith. It based its decision on the fact that Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, is the *image*, or the *icon*, of the invisible God: 'Have I been with you all this time, . . . and you do not know me?' said our Lord, when the disciple Philip asked him to show his followers the Father. 'Whoever has seen me', said Jesus, 'has seen the Father' (Jn 14. 6-14). We have images because God perfected his relationship with Man in the God-Man, his Son, Jesus Christ. Through Christ, we have boldness of access to God.

It is no accident that the iconoclastic controversy in the Christian Church took place at the same time as the rise of Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries AD. Islam is radically transcendent, anti-Trinitarian and non-Incarnational; and it prohibits images as well. The greatest theologian of the day, Saint John of Damascus, who defended the veneration of the icons, lived under Muslim rule.¹ John saw where iconoclasm leads: to the denial of God's Son, his Incarnation, and his Sacraments. Later puritanism and its image-smashing in the radical forms of Protestantism went the same way. Anglicanism is right to side with the traditional Catholic and Orthodox faith against this destruction.

We have images of the Son of God and of his Mother Mary and of the saints for the same reason that our principle worship is on the Lord's Day, the first day of the week, rather than the seventh day, the Sabbath; and for the same reason that we hallow and proclaim the name which is above all names: Jesus.

To paraphrase the seventh Council of Nicaea: 'The Christian veneration of images is not contrary to the first and second commandments which proscribe idols and idolatry'. On the contrary, to quote the Council, 'the honour rendered to an icon passes to its prototype', and 'whoever venerates an image venerates the one portrayed in it'.

When you look at a photograph of someone you love; when you pick up that piece of paper and kiss it; you are not worshipping or serving a paper idol. You love the person whose image you behold.

Our use of icons and images of Christ, our Lady and the saints, together with images of the various mysteries of the faith, leads us on to the incarnate Son. The veneration

¹ From a well-born Christian family, John's father was a tax collector for the Caliph. Paradoxically, John's living in Muslim territory protected him from the Iconoclastic Emperor in Constantinople. Iconoclasm was connected to the Monophysite heresy which had an inadequate understanding of the Union of the Divine and Human Natures in Christ.

of the icon does not terminate there in the image, but points and reaches through it to the Lord (as St Thomas Aquinas wrote). In a word, it embraces none other than Jesus.

Amen.