

Living Beyond Commandments

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 7 September 2014, by David Gill. The readings were Romans 13:8-14 and St Matthew 18:15-20

Twelve years ago, an unholy row erupted in the US state of Alabama. The cause of the rumpus? The ten commandments.

Alabama had just elected a new chief justice, a man named Roy Moore. On taking office, Moore arranged for a granite monument, bearing the words of the ten commandments, to be installed in the centre of the Alabama Judicial Building in the state capital, Montgomery. The thing weighed more than two and a half tons – a quarter of a ton per commandment! Experts said it was so heavy it might fall through the floor.

Opposition was immediate, not for the sake of the floor but because of the first amendment to the US constitution, which bans the establishment of religion. Legal action ensued. The outcome of several judgements and appeals was that the chief justice had been out of line, quotes from scriptures of any kind have no place in public buildings, and the ten commandments must go. The chief justice continued to resist. The state governor joined in the fray by threatening to mobilise the national guard to ensure the monument stayed where it was, thus raising the interesting prospect of armed troops shooting people in defence of the words “Thou shalt not kill”!

Fortunately, it didn't come to that. The ten commandments were removed, followed quickly by the chief justice, and peace returned to Alabama.

This episode points to the difficulty we have with the ten commandments. Not just -- where do they fit in a multicultural, multi-religious, secular state? But -- where if anywhere do they belong in our lives today?

The commandments, indeed all the rules and conventions we find in the bible, emerged long ago in cultures far different from our own. They address some circumstances we no longer face. They're silent about many dilemmas we do face. They lack the insights humanity has garnered through some three millennia.

There's another problem, and it's us. With human beings, for some reason, rules can be self-defeating. They don't work very well.

Visit Manly, where I live, and the first thing you encounter as you walk up The Corso are long lists of things you're not allowed to do. You can't ride a bike. You

mustn't get into fights [Joshua, please, note]. You're not allowed to whiz around on a skateboard [Faith, please, no skateboarding]. And the biggie, the rule that is universally ignored: do not feed the birds. Our otherwise admirable Manly Council seems not to realise that the minute you ban something, everyone wants to assert their independence and do it.

For example, how do you react when confronted by a sign saying "Wet Paint: Do not touch"? Be honest now: you want to reach out and touch it, just to make sure, just to be you. Right?

I live in an eight story apartment block, which has a rule saying we mustn't disturb the sleep of our neighbours. Let me confess to a recurring temptation. Wouldn't it be exciting, one of these nights, to get out my bagpipes, sneak up to the top floor, press every button in the lift, and descend floor-by-floor while treating the neighbours to a sleep-shattering rendition of "Scotland the Brave" – with a getaway car waiting at the ground floor. Wouldn't that be great?

We mortals aren't much good at keeping rules of any kind, whether they're invented by a body corporate or dished up to us by Moses on tablets of stone.

Jesus himself doesn't seem to have been much of a rules man. Yes, he went along with the rules of his religion and the conventions of his culture. But he didn't hesitate to drop some of those rules – Sabbath keeping, for example, or food laws. He wasn't afraid to ignore cultural conventions either, enjoying the company of people everyone thought were the wrong kind. For him, human beings mattered. More than anything else. Commandments included.

We heard St Paul's take on this in today's first reading. The commandments, he wrote, are summed up in the word: love. "Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law". In other words, don't try to live the commandments way. Live the Christ way. Let love become the centre of your being, shaping the way you deal with others and cope with life's complexities. That way, you will fulfil whatever in the commandments may be of enduring importance, and much more besides.

But do not fall into the trap of treating love as one more rule. Yes, I know Jesus spoke of it as "a new commandment" but let's not take that too literally. Some things just cannot be commanded.

Back when I was playing at being a soldier, the commanding officer of Sydney University Regiment decided at one point that there should be a regimental ball. To improve morale, he said. So, a regimental ball having been decreed,

one was duly organised. That evening, just before things got under way, the CO called us together. “Gentlemen,” he said, for in those days we all were, “I want this night to be a success. You *will* enjoy yourselves!”

Of course, joy doesn’t work that way, even for colonels. You can order a pizza. You can order a cup of coffee. You can even order a taxi, though it may never come. But you cannot order joy.

You can’t command love either. From other people. Even from yourself.

But you can do something else. You can clear the decks for love. So often, without knowing it, people are blocked from renewed life with God and others by their accumulated tangles of fear and guilt, their crippling preoccupations with self.

Push that stuff aside. Allow yourself to be loved. Accept that you are accepted. Trust the divine grace that holds you. Reach out for the forgiveness that carries your name.

Remember when you were trying to learn how to swim? If your experience was anything like mine you probably struggled hard at it, paddling with your arms, kicking with your legs, controlling your breathing, and then – if you were like me – sinking like a stone! All the effort in the world was not turning me into a swimmer. The more I tried, the faster I sank. Then came the magic moment. Someone taught me about floating. I didn’t have to struggle. I could trust the water to hold me up. Then, the paddling and kicking started to get results. Trust made the difference.

And it always does. Trust – or, if you want another word for it, faith.

In the words of Anthony de Mello, a Jesuit from Sri Lanka: “Love is not something you produce; love is not something you have; love is something that has you”.

Today we approach the holy table of the Lord, to receive again the bread and wine of Christ’s presence. We do so remembering the love that has us, wondering at the love that nourishes us, grateful for the love that never abandons us.

And praying that we, in our time, may reflect more of that love in our living.