

For the Honour of the Name

Readings: Leviticus 22:31-33; 1Peter 2:9-12; Matthew 5:33-37

The whole school sat in assembly, quiet as Mr Haywood, the Vice Principal of Friends School, made his way to the podium. There was tension. Each of us knew what was coming, not the details but we knew how it would start. "I have had a call from an old scholar".

And sure enough right on cue it began. "I have had a call from an old scholar who said that she saw Friends' School boys fighting with Hutchins' boys in Franklin's Square with their blazers off.. " Then as he slammed the podium for effect he said "We (thump) will (thump) not (thump) tolerate (thump) such behaviour, the good name of our school is at stake." And then the culprits, if known, would be listed for detention.

Mr Haywood might have been theatrical, even melodramatic but he made his point very effectively, we were not by our words or our behaviour to drag down the good name of the school. It would not be tolerated.

As we look at the third commandment, of not taking the Lord's name in vain, this reminds us that whilst we will have to consider the dangers of blasphemy, the normal understanding of this commandment, there are many other ways in which we can disparage, denigrate or drag down the good name of our God and they should not be tolerated.

SPEAKING IN VAIN

This third commandment is, of course most commonly understood to be a commandment restricted how we speak, and some translations reflect this. So *The Message* translates the commandment: "No using the name of God, your God, in curses or silly banter; God won't put up with the irreverent use of his name."

The ancient Jews were so concerned to ensure that they did not denigrate God's name in any way that when they were writing out their scriptures as soon as they had written the name of the Lord they would dispose of the quill. If they made a mistake writing the name of the Lord the whole scroll had to be destroyed. They would not say the name of the Lord, "Yahweh", they would say "adoni" instead which means my Lord (a practice that our Bibles continue). Eventually even that was considered dangerous and they would say "heaven" instead which is why Matthew's Gospel calls the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven. Yahweh was only said once a year on the Day of Atonement when the high priest announced the blessing in the name of the Lord.

Now while we may consider this rather extreme, it shows the extreme reverence that they showed for God's name. It is harder to imagine a greater difference between that culture and ours where God and Jesus are bandied about with as much care and respect as a pair of old shoes. Certainly we as Christians should be offended by such talk which cheapens and demean our God and our saviour, but we may need to watch our own tongue as well.

Unfaithfully Speaking in the Name of the Lord

Particular care needs to be taken when daring to speak in the name of the Lord. The Scriptures takes a very dim view of someone saying "Thus says the Lord" when the Lord has said no such thing (see Deut 18:17-22 see also Galatians 1:6-9) or when someone speaks wrongly about God (see Job 42:7-9)

Some sections of the Christian church which seem to blithely announce that the Lord has spoken to them need to be careful. It is also a warning to all who preach or teach, indeed an who seek to speak in the name of the Lord to watch their life and doctrine closely that they do not speak falsely of the Lord.

Swearing

This however is not swearing as such. Swearing was to make a promise using an oath, "By God I will do this". We as a culture tend not to do this, perhaps under the influence of this command, but it was very common in the ancient world and in the Middle East today. The problem is if the action is not carried through no fault of his own, the name of God is brought low. Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount that we, his followers, are just to let our yes be yes and our no be no, to be truthful people without the need for oaths on top.

We may think that we are doing pretty well on this one but it is worth considering the way in which our services end here at the Cathedral. The Deacon says "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord" to which we all respond "In the name of Christ!" We commit ourselves to act in the name of Christ, so when we do not behave well our saviour's name is brought low by our behaviour. There is more on view in this command than just speaking.

MORE THAN WORDS

Literally the commandment says "You shall not lift up the Lord's name empty." So it related to anyway in which the Lord's name is profaned. Did you notice in the reading from Leviticus that not profaning the name of the Lord is not tied to the way that his people speak, but to keeping all the commandments? As God's people they have to keep his commandments, or his name is diminished.

Paul in Romans as he surveys ways in which some of God's historic people have failed in the past quotes Ezekiel 39 when he says "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." (Romans 2:24). The nation that was to bring the nations to God, brought notoriety instead.

Likewise for us, we pray "hallowed be thy name", but our actions all too often do not back up our prayer. Hypocrisy has caused far more damage to God's name than blasphemy. We think not only of the scandal of sexual abuse in the church but also any time some has said "how could Christians behave like that." Perhaps even how can I as a Christian have done that. God's name is blasphemed because of his church. Our behaviour reflects on our God.

Perhaps more insidious is when we empty the Lords name of meaning by the way live, we carry his name empty, it makes no difference to the way we live.

Perhaps I can use my Star Trek cuff links as an example for a moment. (So far they have reminded us that the commandments are so we can live long and prosper, of our prime directive to put God in his rightful place, and I'm rather surprised that Will did not use them as an example of idolatry last week.) If I saw someone else wearing such items I should expect that I could go up to them and start a conversation with them about the various series, film characters and so on. It would be a travesty if they actually knew nothing about Star Trek at all, and didn't really care about it. They would be carrying those cuff links empty, it meant nothing to them.

So often that is how people treat their Christianity, it doesn't seem to matter to them. To move a bit further down my arm as followers of Christ as we obey the commandments we should stick out like sore thumbs, but we do so very rarely. Rather we are all thumbs at seeking to live his way which would not get a divine thumbs up.



THE HONOUR OF THE NAME

Now there is a problem in preaching through the 10 Commandments. It would be perfectly possible to spend each sermon showing just how we break the commandment and sending everyone home feeling rather guilty. There are times when such a sermon may be appropriate but a series of 10 such sermons would almost certainly lead to a drop off in numbers as the weeks went on so that in the end we would be left with just the theologically masochistic.

Perhaps more importantly it is unlikely to bring about any great change in behaviour. At school we were regularly berated for our behaviour, it didn't change for we had not understood the importance of bearing the School's good name, particularly as a pacifist Quaker organisation.

We then need to spend sometime considering the value of God's name and the inestimable privilege of carrying that name. It is as we grasp this that we will be encouraged to not carry it in an empty fashion.

Names of God

In the Old Testament God has numerous names: simply God; God almighty, God of hosts, God most high. But it is in the Exodus that the name of God is fully revealed, Yahweh. I am who am. I will be known by what I do, I am the eternal creator God that reveals himself as a redeemer by his saving acts. This is the name of God that the Old Covenant saints were so careful to not misuse, not just any old god, but the name of Yahweh, the Lord, their God.. But the "I am" has revealed himself more fully in his Son Jesus Christ, the Emmanuel, God with us, the Prince of Peace, redeemer, saviour, who has been given "the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:9-11)

We cannot put too high a value on the name of God our Father and Jesus our Lord, it should never be taken lightly. We do not honour him so that he will save and redeem us but because he has saved us.

People of the Name

Now the really amazing thing is that this wonderful, powerful God chooses people to be his own, to bear his name. That was Israel, the chosen people in the Old Testament, now it is all who have turned to Christ. 1 Peter 2: 9-10 says to all Christians "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

It is by grace alone that we bear his name. It is an honour so we should honour it. (In a nice piece of synchronicity the communion hymn for this service was based on this passage with the music to the Friends School hymn.)

What an honour, that God should choose us, even us, to bear his name, to be part of his kingdom. He chose us knowing what we are like, that there would be times that we would let him down but he chose us anyway.

But there is more to it than that, bearing God's name is our hope. In the Old Testament God promised to save the people of Israel from Exile not because they were great, and wonderful but because of the bad name that he was getting through them (Ezekiel 36:20-23). He had to vindicate his name by saving his people. Being entrusted with the Lord's name is a great act of mercy on God's part, but it is also our hope. For his own sake, he will vindicate his name, bring glory to his name by saving his people, even people like us who let him down so much. Once again all of this is of grace, we bear his name so he will save us.

Understanding the value of the name of God, the honour and hope of being part of his people, of being baptised in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, of being

Christians, followers of Christ, will help us to live lives that bring glory to his name rather than disrepute. In all the big and small things of life, in work, family we will want to see God being honoured, to show that we carry the name of our God with pride and desire to see the glory go to him.¹ Then taking God's name will not be a vain thing and empty thing, but rather something we glory in and we do in hope as his people.

Then rather than our mouths speaking emptily of God we will with the Psalmist want to say "Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done. Sing to him, sing praise to him; tell of all his wonderful acts. Glory in his holy name." (Psalms 105:1-3).

Let us then as God's people, a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation who have received his mercy declare his praises and go in peace to love and serve the Lord ... in the name of Christ.

¹ Note the following in relation to behaviour and bringing God into disrepute.

Slaves 1 Timothy 6:1 "Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their masters as worthy of all honour, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be blasphemed."

Wives Titus 2:3-5 Likewise, tell the older women to be reverent in behaviour, not to be slanderers or slaves to drink; they are to teach what is good, so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be self-controlled, chaste, good managers of the household, kind, being submissive to their husbands, so that the word of God may not be discredited.

Young Men Titus 2:6-8 Likewise, urge the younger men to be self-controlled. Show yourself in all respects a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, gravity, and sound speech that cannot be censured; then any opponent will be put to shame, having nothing evil to say of us.