

A sermon preached by Mrs Charlie Lloyd-Evans in St Mary's Church, Market Drayton on Sunday 7th August 2016 at 10.30am

COMMANDMENT 2 "No idols"

So we are up to the penultimate sermon in this series on the 10 Commandments. A lot so far have focused on how we relate to people around us, lying, coveting, stealing, murder.....but as we continued we have started to focus more on our relationship with God himself, more subtly at first, looking at how we keep the Sabbath and then last week talking about how we honour his name, but these last two commandments are really coming to the heart of it all, focusing more and more on God himself.

The last two commandments are very closely linked, almost two sides of the same coin, because next week we will be looking at the awesomeness of God, we shall have no other God's but him, he is the one true God. But this week we are looking at a commandment that deals not so much with who God is, but who he isn't. We are dealing with the topic of idolatry, which could be defined in a range of different ways. It could be defined as giving worship to things that are not God, or allowing things to distract us from God, or allowing things to be more important than God.

This commandment talks about the idolatry in terms of images and statues. It says *'You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God,'*. Worshipping statues and images does sound absurd, doesn't it. If we think of idolatry only in terms statues and carved images, made out of wood and metal we can be tempted to think 'well that's OK, that is a commandment you will not see me breaking", but when we think like that we miss the extent, the variety and the subtleness of idolatry.

It is expressed this way in the commandment, because that was the clear context of idolatry at the time. It is idolatry in a very overt sense, but idolatry is more than that, because it is anything that takes us away from worshipping God. And I think it is the subtleness that is most dangerous. There is a real subtleness about idolatry, and I think it is one of the ways that the Devil really tries to get a foothold in our lives. Because it takes so little effort to achieve it. It takes so little effort to take our focus away from God.

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C.S Lewis, in his book *The Screwtape Letters* has a wonderful example of this. The book is the story of the letters that Screwtape, a senior devil, is writing to his nephew Wormwood, as Wormwood is attempting to stop his charge, his human, from developing a relationship with God. And at one point Screwtape says that one of his charges once started to think about God. He says, he was in an art gallery, looking at a painting, and it inspired him, and he just started to think about the possibility of God, of a creator. So Screwtape says is 'what I did is I took him outside and I showed him a number 8 bus'. In order for the Devil to win against someone finding faith in God, he does not have to turn them against God, he does not have to convince them that God is not real or any of those things, he just has to distract them. And even after that, even when we have found faith in God, for the Devil to damage and undermine that relationship, to stop us experiencing the full power of that relationship here and now, all he has to do is distract us, to take our focus off God. It is a very subtle form of what idolatry is, and I think it is one of the Devil's most powerful weapons.

The Devil has not wanted me to preach this weekend. He has attacked a lot this week. He has distracted me.... with computer games, with reading for assignments that are due, with meeting with friends, shopping with the girls..... everything became a higher priority and focus than preparing this sermon. Yesterday morning, I was really battling and determined to get focused on the task of doing this, and he really let rip. I do not need to go into the details, but believe me, the battle guns were out, and I had to call on the prayer warriors to draw me through it. Because idolatry is subtle and dangerous and the Devil does not want us to be armed against it.

I think idolatry it is a particular danger in our modern society, for various reasons. Not only is it because of the rise and range of formal religions we are exposed to, but also because of the modern trends in terms of our attitude to religion. Culturally society has a tendency to reject any sort of authority in the religious area, they want a spiritual experience, but they want those spiritual experiences to be undemanding. Spirituality is just something you feel. There is not a one size fits all religion, anything is permissible, nothing is ruled out. The modern society approach of denying a universal truth in preference for a 'truth is only truth to the individual' attitude is pervasive and damaging. Ultimately it demands a god who fits in with us, rather than us fitting in with him. Our susceptibility to idolatry is summed up by the change in the Girl Guides Association promise over the years.

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The original wording of the promise stated 'I promise that I will do my best to do my duty to God', this was then subtly change to 'do my duty to my God'. The addition of that two letter word made a vast difference, because now it implies that the thing that defines God is me, I can create a god as I want him to be. But the promise has been changed even further that that, because it now says 'I promise to be true to myself and develop my beliefs'. It makes it even clearer that the only one I have to be accountable to is myself. And suddenly the focus is no longer on God is it. It is on me.

This is not new. It is inherent to human nature. Even as the commandments were being given to Moses on Mount Sinai, the Israelites in the valley below were engaged in idolatry. They wanted a God that suited them, that was defined by their circumstances and what they were used to. They had been used to the gods of Egypt and the elaborate golden statues of their deities. Which is why they asked Aaron to make them a god. And he did. He took all the gold they had and created the golden bull. Then he said 'this is your God that bought you out of Egypt'. Most bible translations translate this as 'these are your gods', but the original Hebrew could be translated as plural or singular 'this is your God'. Aaron was not attempting to introduce a new God, but he was defining God in a way that suited the people rather than by how God actually is. And this is why this commandment focuses in its wording on not making images or statues and worshipping them.

The other danger of images is that images can never be a true representation of God. Take for example the golden bull for the Israelites This may have effectively represented the strength of God, but said nothing of his love, or his glory or his holiness. Images can never match up to the reality of who God is. Now if images help us to worship God then they have value. The church I am part of in Dubai is in the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf, so I end up visiting Cyprus fairly regularly. The main Christian denomination there is Greek Orthodox, and I do not know if you have ever been in a Greek Orthodox Church, but it is full of icons. All these images of Christ, and of various saints. If you ever get the chance to visit Larnaca in Cyprus then I recommend a visit to St Lazarus church. It really is visually quite spectacular, if a little overwhelming, with literally hundreds of icons. I know many people who find icons useful in worship and prayer, Rublev's icon is a classic image that many like to use during prayer. It is an image of the three men who visit Abraham and is a representation of the Trinity.

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But I had always found the idea of icons rather strange, but I then came across the definition of an icon as a window through which to see God. That then made sense. Because when you look through a window, you do not see the window you see what is on the other side. The problem becomes if we start to believe that that particular window is the only way to view God. And that is when an aid to worship becomes an object of worship. And it becomes idolatry. How important to our worship are the aids to worship, the building, the style of service, the music. We have to guard against the aids to worship becoming objects of worship.

So what other things are there that we can idolize. There are the classic things like money, sex, power, in all their different forms, shopping, the acquiring of possessions, anything we take pride in or that monopolizes our time has the potential to be an idol. But you could say, 'so what?', 'so what if I take pride in my garden, or I love to go fishing, or I am a passionate Manchester United fan?' Surely God can cope with that? Surely God is not threatened by that?

Well this is when we get on to the second part of the commandment where it says '*for I the Lord your God am a jealous God*'. Jealously can sound like a fairly petty emotion can't it, but let me paint a picture for you.

Gareth is coming back to the UK in a few days. Imagine if when he arrives I see in his wallet that he has a picture of another woman next to the picture of me. How do you think I would react? Do you think I would look at it and just say, 'Oh well, he is entitled to his privacy.' Or do you think I might say, 'Er Gareth, who is that?' (let us just assume that my reaction would be as calm and measured as that). And suppose he answered 'Oh that is just a friend of mine, nothing important, we have just struck up a bit of a friendship, and when I am feeling a bit low or in need of cheering up, or I need a bit of affection I go and talk to her and she makes me feel better'. In that scenario do you think jealousy on my part would be petty or do you think it would be justified. Do you think I would be happy to share him like that? Do you think that would be OK? Or would that damage our relationship? This is one of the reasons that idolatry is referred to as adultery so often in the Old Testament, because it is unfaithfulness. 'You have prostituted yourselves with other nations because you worshipped their idols' (Ezekiel 23:30). When you visit a castle and you enter the throne room, you never see a throne pew. There is only room for one on the throne.

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None of the things I mentioned a little while ago are bad in themselves. It is not wrong to take pride in our garden, or to love fishing or even be a Man U fan. The questions to ask ourselves if we want to know whether it has crossed over into idolatry is 'do we allow them to take our focus away from God, or do we hold them lightly?'. Could we let go of them if required? I struggled to let go of this church when I first moved to Dubai. Many people here know what a wrench that was, and it continued to be a struggle for some time after the move. But then I was struck by just a few words of a verse in the book of Deuteronomy. Chapter 6 verse 23, 'he brought us out from there so that he might bring us in'. The verse is talking about the Israelites being bought out from Egypt so that they could be bought into the promised land, but just those few words of the verse spoke to me 'he brought us out from there so that he might bring us in', I had to let go, so that I could enter into the new blessing he had planned for me. And now I have been doubly blessed. I can come back here and still be part of this church family, and in a couple of weeks I can go back to Dubai and be welcomed back into that church family too.

In our second reading this morning we have the example of the rich young man, coming to Jesus asking what he needs to do to follow him. Jesus response is to keep all the commandments, which this man says he has done since he was a boy. And then we are told that Jesus looks on him with compassion and says one thing you lack, go and sell all of your possessions and give them to the poor then come and follow me. And the man was greatly saddened because he was very rich. Some take this as a message that we should not have money, but having the money was not the problem, the problem was that having and keeping the money was more important than following Jesus. In this way it became an idol for this young man, because it took the place of God. It was more important than God. He did not hold it lightly.

Our temptation when faced with idolatry is to take this story from the gospels as our model of response. That we should give up the idolatrous behavior completely. If money is our idol then we should get rid of all our money. And this may be true for some things. Some things are inherently wrong, but often the action itself is not wrong, but the importance we put on it is the error. Let me give you an example. How about worship of our own bodies. Magazines and media put huge pressure on us to achieve the body beautiful image. To diet and exercise ourselves to excess to achieve this perfection. But when we get to the point that how we feel about ourselves is defined by the number we see when we look down at the scales in the morning, it has become idolatry.

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How we feel about ourselves should be defined by the fact that we are made in the image of God, not by the lumps and bumps we see when we look in the mirror, or the number we see when we look down at the scales, or the information we see on the medical report. If those things define how we feel about ourselves then they become idolatry. But this does not mean that we should not take care of our bodies. We should take care of our bodies because they are gifts from God and we are made in his image. But the state of our bodies should not be the core of our self worth. Our self worth comes from being made in his image and being loved by him.

Now, with this whole process of looking at the commandments it can be tempting to fall into a sense of guilt. Of being faced with our own failures, because we all know that we will all struggle with these things, and sometimes.... regularly..... we will fail. But that does not need to be our response. As we heard in our New Testament reading today, when Jesus said it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God the disciples response was 'that is impossible, who then can be saved?' and Jesus responds 'with man it is impossible, but not with God, all things are possible with God'. God has made it possible, through the death of his son on the cross you can be sure that you are loved, you are forgiven and you are accepted. So we should guard against idolatry, we should not allow the devil that foothold, but when we struggle and when we fail, do not be consumed by guilt, but remember 'you are loved, forgiven and accepted'.

Amen