

No Blasphemy - The Third Commandment

'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.'

I remember the first time we took our three young children to watch Leicester City. Michael must have been about 5 years old, so that makes Tim about 9 and Jane 7 or 8. We had a great afternoon. I don't think Leicester won on that occasion, but what I do remember is the language on the terraces! I commented to a friend afterwards that I had never heard so much religious language in so short a space of time!

So, yes, there was much 'taking of the Lord's name in vain'. And while, as a Christian, I don't enjoy hearing 'Jesus' used as swear word, I also believe that, of the forms of blasphemy which we commit as human beings, this offends God less than many others. You see I just don't expect the thunderbolts of God's wrath to come raining down every time we misuse names which are sacred to our tradition. And yet...

And yet every time we pray The Lord's Prayer we say 'hallowed be thy name' and I think there are some very important aspects of the hallowing of God's name which demand our careful attention. In last month's article I spoke about the importance to Israel of the Holy Name of God, YHWH, and the fact that it is not to be spoken. Careless use of names for God and Jesus Christ, as well as careless use of names sacred to other religious traditions, causes needless offence. It is generally not a good idea.

However, there is, to my mind an even more serious sin of blasphemy, in which the name of God is associated with words and acts, particularly words and acts of violence, which I believe deeply offend the God whom I honour and worship. What I mean is that a particular attitude of mind is attributed to God which exhibits more about human prejudice than the God whom I believe to be revealed in Jesus Christ.

So, there are violent words. 'God hates fags', goes the banner displayed in some angry demonstration against gay rights. Quite apart from the debates about the rights and wrongs of homosexual nature and practice, inside and outside the church, the thought that God hates anyone seems blasphemous to me. What God hates, surely, is the sin that mars the image of God in any human being: the sin, not the sinner. Yet I would wish to go even further than this and challenge the perception that a person, by nature homosexual in inclination, is guilty of any kind of sin by simply being who they are.

Then there are violent actions. One of the most troubling books I have read in recent years was Simon Sebag Montefiore's powerful history of Jerusalem. For he relates in some detail the bloody horrors of the crusades - literally rivers of blood - in slaughter by soldiers wearing the Christian cross on their armour. Such, it seems to me, was the terrible blasphemy of the Crusades that the use of the very word 'crusade' nowadays, in whatever context, makes me flinch.

On October 8th we celebrated national Poetry Day, and driving to a pastoral visit I heard some wonderful poems from Donne and Herbert read beautifully on Radio 4 - so beautiful and powerful it moved me, and entirely appropriate at a time when I was concerned about the person I was going to visit. Commenting on the poetry of John Donne and George Herbert, both of them Anglican priests, Andrew Marr reminded us that Donne can be extraordinarily zealous in his religious fervour - while Herbert is much more the gentler pastor. Hearing such fervour, Marr noted, made you realise the extremes to which religious

conviction carried people in England in the 16th and 17th Centuries, and made one therefore less surprised when hearing of violent acts today carried out in the name of a religious cause.

This reminder of what religious zeal can do, in any religious tradition, helpfully underlines how blasphemous acts can be carried out in God's name in any age. This we should remember when we rightly condemn the blasphemy of suicide bombing.

Horrible words and terrible actions committed in the name of God: these are the extremes of violent blasphemy to which we are alerted by the third Commandment. But there are lesser forms of blasphemy of which, in a mundane way, we are all at times guilty. For, if we are, as the Bible tells us, truly made in God's image, and if we, in the wonderful words of St Paul, *'beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord,'* (2 Corinthians 3.18) then any demeaning of that image of God in us, in you and in me, is the sin of the third Commandment.

'You idiot!' When I am rude to my brother, or say hurtful words to my sister, then I am, to some degree *'taking the name of the Lord in vain.'* Jesus himself said as much: *'But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.'* (Matthew 5.22)

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