

Sermon – No Blasphemy 8-5-22

May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Matthew 12 v 22 – 32

Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.

It's just not true is it? Words can make someone fearful, worried, sad. They can make someone physically shrink. There is a reason that verbal abuse is now recognised.

But words can also build us up, encourage us, bring hope and broaden our horizons. They can make us smile and laugh.

Words are powerful. The way we use them matters.

This morning we are looking at the third commandment, starting with Exodus, moving through the Old Testament to our reading from 1 Samuel and finally to our reading from Matthew. Hopefully this will build up a picture of what blasphemy is and how we might respond to this commandment.

There is something about the ten commandments that seem to lend themselves to King James English and the third commandment is commonly stated as 'Thou shalt not blaspheme' or 'Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain'.

But let me read Exodus chapter 20 verse 7 from the NRSV which is rather more helpful I think:

'You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name'.

This is, as I said before, the third commandment and though there is no indication that they are in a specific order of importance, coming right after 'You shall have no other gods before me' and 'You shall not make for yourself an idol', does suggest that this should be taken seriously.

Added to that, it is one of four commandments with an additional comment – 'the Lord will not acquit, or hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name'.

Why is blaspheming, or misusing the name of the Lord so serious? We live in a society where the use of Lord and Christ and God is often no more than punctuation, the verbal equivalent of an exclamation mark.

To understand why it is included in the ten commandments we need to recognise that the name of the Lord our God is not just an identifier to separate him from other people or things. It isn't that we need it so we can say this is the lectern, this is the microphone, this is Hazel, this is Tara, this is the Lord. The Lord's name is a way of saying in one name, in shorthand if you like, all he is and all he has done. One person says, 'the names of God are like miniature portraits and promises.'

When the name of the Lord is spoken, we recognise not just a name but the verses at the beginning of the Bible, 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth'.

We recognise the words God said to Moses on Mount Sinai: 'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness'.

We recognise all the words used to describe God - Holy One, Redeemer, Deliverer, Judge, Provider.

The use of the name Lord captures all those things and more. When we sing songs that talk about lifting his name on high, we are worshipping him as we acknowledge all he has done and is.

In contrast the misuse of his name can be literally translated as 'lift up the name...to emptiness'

When we misuse the name of the Lord, we empty the name of all those characteristics, all those deeds, we deny or scorn all he is and has done. It is a personal and dismissive insult to the Lord God Almighty and it strongly suggests that he is in fact not the Lord our God.

Words of Douglas Adams, the writer of the Hitchhikers guide to the galaxy, and an atheist himself describe this quite well. He wrote 'Words used carelessly, as if they did not matter in any serious way, often allowed otherwise well-guarded truths to seep through'.

When we use the name of the Lord, or Jesus, carelessly, what truth are we allowing to seep through?

Moving on, our Old Testament reading doesn't use the word blasphemy, but it shares many of the same characteristics of showing contempt for the Lord and of emptying his words of meaning.

In those days when people came to the tent of meeting to offer a sacrifice. They burned all the fat to the Lord and then the breast or right foreleg were given to the priests as their portion of the sacrifice.

But this was not what was happening. If you brought your offering to the temple when Hophni and Phinehas were the priests things happened differently. They took more than just their allotment of meat, taking whatever their servant could fish out of the cooking pot, and they wanted their portion before the fat was burned.

Why was this such a big deal that the priests are called scoundrels and it is said that they are sinning against not others but directly against God?

The priests were entrusted with representing the people to God following the law given to Moses by the Lord. They were the direct words of God about how the people were to worship their Lord God. But, v17 says, these priests treated the word of the Law with contempt. The law very clearly stated what was to be given to the priest. It very clearly stated that 'All the fat is the Lord's'.

But they did not take the words seriously, they emptied them of their meaning and power as they intentionally did their own thing to benefit themselves. They took what belonged to the Lord and in doing so they showed what they really thought about him and his words. They acted casually in the place where God dwelt among his people and made a mockery of worship.

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V12 describes Hophni and Phinehas as having no regard for the Lord. The direct translation is 'They did not know Yahweh'. And this seeped through into their behaviour.

Now we come to our New Testament reading, Matthew 12 v 22 – 32.

In the story so far, Jesus has come into conflict with the Pharisees by picking grain and healing on the Sabbath. They weren't actually breaking the Law of God, they were just breaking the Pharisaic regulations, the lists of prohibitions that the Pharisees have drawn up. In response the Pharisees have, v14, conspired against Jesus, how to destroy him'.

Now, at the beginning of our passage, Jesus heals someone who is blind and mute and demon possessed. Now that this person can see and speak people are no doubt asking 'How did Jesus do that?' 'Who is Jesus?' To which there are two answers.

The first is from the crowd. They are amazed and maybe rather confused. They don't say 'This is the Son of David', rather they question 'Is this the Son of David?'. He is not conforming to their idea of a conquering Messiah coming to and liberate them from an occupying force, but they are open to the idea that he might be. They are watching and thinking and considering.

The second response is that of the Pharisees. They say 'It is only by the ruler of demons that this fellow casts out the demons'. They accuse Jesus of using demonic powers to heal the person.

When people offer advice about writing a sermon they often suggest that it's good to include an illustration. Happily in this passage Jesus' response to these accusations is to point out the flaws in the Pharisees' argument, using not one but a series of illustrations that expose the Pharisees before he drives home the main point.

The first is the idea that a kingdom will fall if it is divided. If Beelzebul or Satan is casting out a demon it is a divided kingdom and it will fall, which would be counterproductive. There is no point in doing that. This might also be a play on the word 'Pharisee' which means divided off, or separated. Their kingdom of 'divided people' that they are determined to protect, will it stand or be laid waste?

Then he gives them a choice, either I am casting out demons by Satan, in which case your exorcists are as well, or I am casting them out by the Spirit of God, in which case the Kingdom of God has arrived. Clearly the Pharisees are not going to like either option, they are not going to want to ally themselves with either Satan or Jesus.

Next, he points out that to steal from a strong man's house you have to tie up the strong man first. Either that or you have just executed an elaborate hoax. For Jesus to have removed a demon from someone he must have first have defeated Satan.

Finally, he says you are either with me or against me, in the same way you can gather or scatter. You can't do both.

And here he gets to his main point – if you blaspheme against the Holy Spirit you will not be forgiven.

For the Pharisees have blasphemed, they have taken the name of Jesus and rather than lifting it up on high, they have lifted it up – to emptiness. They have emptied it of who he is, the Son of God, fully God and fully Man.

Not only that, they are going a step further and saying that Jesus is not acting in the power of the Holy Spirit but in the power of Satan; they are assigning who he is and what he does to Satan. In doing so they are denying and scorning who he is and what he has and will do. It makes a mockery of him coming to bring God's kingdom here on earth, it denies that he will defeat death and bring life.

It is a direct insult to the Son of God. Not a mistake, a wondering, or a doubting or a discussion. This is a calculated, deliberate refusal to acknowledge God's power at work, in the face of all that he is doing and saying, and it is done because of their own agenda, their determination not to be challenged.

They, like the priests in 1 Samuel, had no regard for the Lord. In rejecting Jesus, they rejected the Lord, they did not know him.

This passage often worries people, especially if verse 31 about blaspheming against the Holy Spirit never being forgiven is quoted on its own. What if I accidentally commit the sin of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit? Is that it? Never forgiven.

The difference here is between a failure to recognise the light and a deliberate rejection of it once recognised. Anyone worried about blaspheming against the Holy Spirit is probably already asking good questions that acknowledge something of who Jesus is, of his majesty and power.

However, if we decide that we can treat Jesus casually, use his name for our own ends, attribute things to him that are not good, even evil, then we are I think on more shaky ground.

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And maybe the truth that is seeping through is that if we don't have any regard for Jesus and don't know him.

How do we guard against this? How do we keep the third commandment and not blaspheme? How do we grow in our service of him rather than our own ends? How do we honour the Lord?

In a prevailing culture that does not have a regard for Jesus, that is against him, how do we stand with him? How do we, who are in positions of relative power, wealth and privilege resist using for our own ends?

I would suggest that the opposite to blaspheming is praise and worship of who God is and what he has done. The more we do this the more we understand who Jesus really is and has done, we understand who we are and what we are called to do. We get things into the right God-centred perspective.

As we take the name of the Lord seriously, what starts seeping through is awe and wonder, love and gratitude.

Mark Greene does just this in a poem in response to Jesus coming as a baby with which I would like to finish:

Oh my God,
My God indeed,
Creator of infinite space,
Come to this God-forechosen place,
Majesty, omnipotence, glory,
Distilled in this newborn grace.

How can it be,
This your contradictory singularity?
God and man
Shepherd and lamb.
Prince and peasant
Saviour and sacrifice.
Potentate and refugee
One and three.

Oh my God,
My God in deed,
Sole seed of divine purity
Come in mortal humility to bleed
For all our sin-stained need.
Oh my God, my God in deed...

Come to me. Come to me....