

Deuteronomy 5.1-21

I want to travel with you, in the next few minutes, from the Ten Commandments to the three heroes of Winchester whose actions are celebrated in our summer exhibition, Walker, Fox and Jackson. It might be an unexpected journey which will remind you of the famous advice to the traveller, If I were you I wouldn't start from here!

But start from here we will, because it's good to be with such a passage which reminds us how faith and culture intertwine - the ten commandments are as much a part of our heritage and the cultural landscape as this Cathedral.

However, we're not going to make the connection quite so quickly or simply as that. We're going to start with a much smaller comparison between two versions of the ten commandments, the one we have heard today from Deuteronomy Chapter 5 and the one in Exodus Chapter 20. I'm going to read them both out, in the hope that you can spot the difference.

Exodus: You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

Deuteronomy: Neither shall you covet your neighbour's wife. Neither shall you desire your neighbour's house, or field, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

You'll have noticed the difference between the prohibitive - 'you shall not' and the apodictic - 'neither shall you'.

You'll have noticed the difference in word order - 'house' first in Exodus, 'neighbour's wife' in Deuteronomy.

And you'll have noticed that in Exodus the verb 'covet' covers everything in the list, whereas in Deuteronomy only the neighbour's wife should not be coveted while the others items should not be desired, or craved.

So there are a few points of contrasts but what does it all mean?

There is scholarly debate about this and the differences mustn't be exaggerated: they both exemplify the social codes prevalent in the Ancient Near East; and we can't really know which is the older. But the code in Deuteronomy seems subtler, whatever its relative age.

Exodus is about the property rights of a man: 'You shall not covet your neighbour's house', meaning holdhold, the contents of which are spelled out in what follows: hands off all that is his - his wife, slaves, livestock etc.

This thought is also present in Deuteronomy, but the wife is set apart - you shall not *covet* her (the verb suggests a disposition resulting in an outward action) whereas the other items you shall not *crave* (the verb suggests an inward disposition).

So the wife in Deuteronomy's version is specifically protected from harmful actions resulting from desire, which fits in with other bits of the book where women are given

protection from abuse, for example female captives in Chapter 21 or women who men marry but then wish to discard in Chapters 22 and 24.

What we might have here is a *relationship which is more than, better than the mere possession of property*, an admission of the value of a wife as someone deserving more than covetousness.

More than property meaning less than possession is the idea I'd like to carry forward into our celebration of the great work of Jackson, Fox, and Walker – and to that trio we ought to add Dean Furneaux, the patron of all Cathedral funding campaigns! Their work was to secure the future of a building which was not theirs, nor their employers for that matter, but which belonged to the Church, the nation and ultimately to God.

It belonged, and still belongs, to the Church because the Cathedral is by definition the Bishop's seat, the focus of the life of the Diocese. And one remembers here the way in which the 1908 Pageant, which was, at least in part, a fund-raising exercise for the works, was viewed by Bishops from across the world visiting this Diocese for the Lambeth Conference.

And it belongs to the nation: the script of the Pageant, too, reminds us how Winchester was seen as significant in the affairs of the nations, indeed the City seemed to be the historic seat of the Empire whether Roman or British – and how right they were!

But the building belongs not just to history but also to God, the Ancient of Days. The act of preserving a sacred building across

time pushes the meaning of the fabric into the realm of transcendence.

No-one could ever have believed that the mortar and stones of the Cathedral were divine, especially as they cracked and lurched under their own weight at the turn of the 20th Century, but the building as a whole remained and now must still remain to remind the City, the County, the World of the eternal glory of God.

It's a costly vocation for a building to fulfil, but a Cathedral is a building not possessed by anyone and much more than individual property. It's a reminder that the Word of God must express himself in and across time in matter, whether it is on stone tablets, as for the Ten Commandments, or in the architecture of stone and wood, or in a sacred book or in the flesh of man.

People get very passionate about Cathedrals. Many people believe, quite rightly, that they have a stake in its life even if their way of belonging to it seems tangential from an immediately religious point of view; that's because the Cathedral is a symbol of transcendence which people gather round and want to protect because it protects them, gives them a sense of abiding meaning and purpose.

We might at this point turn to the commandment about idolatry, because that is the danger of something standing for God's presence and power but not actually being God, but on this day of celebration we should accentuate the positive.

And the positive is this: that if we maintain the right sort of grasp on this Cathedral, if we act upon it without claiming it as our possession, then we will find a gift and a promise.

The Ten Commandments were more than a moral code, they were given to develop the covenant relationship between God and his people. If they chose to obey them God's people would find life and joy in God, but disobedience would lead to death and judgement. Their response to the stone tablets was critical.

So this Cathedral is more than a building. If we allow our awe of it and devotion to it lead to a response of humble service to God himself, such as we see in the lives of our heroes of Winchester, then we shall find life and happiness and leave our own legacy of goodness, either told or untold.

I like to think of William Walker on his lunch-break with his helmet off, eating his pork pie and having a smoke, mulling over the day. Under his diver suit I'm sure he was content within his own skin. I'm sure he took a quiet satisfaction in his work, with all its dangers and discomforts. He was finding life under God and knowing it to be good.

His is the sort of non-possessive action to which this Cathedral calls us, so that we too learn to live in the shelter of God's presence, who truly is eternal and who comes to bless this building, maintained as a symbol of his glory.