

The Ten Commandments

The sixth article by Neil Richardson in our year-long series



6th Commandment:
You shall not murder.

Simple, isn't it?

Except that in the name of the Christian God, and other Gods, many people have died at the hands of religious authorities and religion-inspired state authorities in a variety of circumstances- punishment for perceived theological errors, punishment for capital crimes, wars, in self-defence, and so on.

It seems that when it comes to the 6th Commandment, there are many loop-holes to be found, so many ways in which a deviation may be arrived at, and often in the name of God.

What is the problem?

Well it is quite clear that the Jewish scriptures show that the term “murder” really means criminal murder. It does not mean just killing, and especially not a killing which is sanctioned or even demanded by The Law of Moses, the Torah. See Numbers chapter 35-

16 Anyone who strikes another with an iron object, and death ensues, is a murderer; the murderer shall be put to death. 17 Or anyone who strikes another with a stone in hand that could cause death, and death ensues, is a murderer; the murderer shall be put to death. 18 Or anyone who strikes another with a weapon of wood in hand that could cause death, and death ensues, is a murderer; the murderer shall be put to death. 19 The avenger of blood is the one who shall put the murderer to death; when they meet, the avenger of blood shall execute the sentence. 20 Likewise, if someone pushes another from hatred, or hurls something at another, lying in wait, and death ensues, 21 or in enmity strikes another with the hand, and death ensues, then the one who struck the blow shall be put to death; that person is a murderer; the avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death when they meet. 29 These things shall be a statute and ordinance for you throughout your generations wherever you live.



The sixth commandment has been used to justify many attitudes, from pacifism to vegetarianism to anti-abortionism, but in the end, it is another aspect of social control, a commandment which sets a standard for community life, designed to keep the unruly in check by a sanction of capital punishment for those who kill unlawfully.

Murder has always had a fascination for people. If you look in the Library you will see that there is a huge collection of crime fiction, and of course, our television schedules would look very bare

over the years without Sherlock Holmes, Miss Marple, Poirot, Morse, Frost, and so on, the galaxy of coppers who have entertained us with their detective skills! Murder in this context becomes entertainment and doesn't really shock, as it would in reality. The fascination of taking the life of another person and the impact this has on individuals and families and even whole communities is always close to the Christian soul. To understand why, you need only to read the passion narratives and see the impact which the death of Jesus of Nazareth had on the whole world!



"The Murder", by Paul Cézanne (1839-1906)

Murder rates vary greatly among countries and societies around the world. In the Western world, murder rates in most countries have declined significantly during the 20th century and are now between 1-4 cases per 100,000 people per year. Murder rates in Japan and Iceland are among the lowest in the world, around 0.5; the rate of the United States is among the highest among all developed countries, around 5.5 (2004,) with rates in major cities sometimes over 50 per 100,000. Within the Western world, nearly 90% of all murders are committed by males, with males also being the victims of 74.6% of murders (according the US Department of Justice). There is a sharp peak in the age distribution of murderers between the ages of 17 and 30. People become increasingly unlikely to commit a murder as they age. Incidents of children and adolescents committing murders are also extremely rare, notwithstanding the strong media coverage such cases receive.



As a religious community, Christians will be shocked at any killing of people but especially as a result of their disagreements on matters of theology. The Reformation period claimed many people, from both the Protestant and Catholic sides of the divide. Whilst we may still feel the power of disagreements, the very idea of torturing people to gain confessions is so abhorrent, as to demand apologies all round. And how could they burn each other in public to show the world their total disapproval of their ideas? When I am in Oxford, I always stand quietly in Broad Street at the site of the burning of Archbishop Cranmer, Bishop Ridley, and the others who went to their deaths on that spot.

The disregard for human suffering and the denial of the sanctity of human life evidenced throughout human history is truly shocking, and that is where many of us will come into the debate and feel strongly that we want human life to be cherished, and find in the 6th commandment a source of inspiration. But we will have to take a view on the issue of killing and punishments as demanded by the Bible. The Old Testament shows quite clearly that God was understood as commanding death as punishment. For 21st century Christians, the concept of a punishing God who demands death is impossible to sustain and we are again in the business of being selective on which bits of the Bible to accept and which to decline on the grounds that they are culturally bound to the cruel and desperate past. It's a good game, and we all need to play it!

A reminder. If you have questions or contributions to make on this series of articles, please send them to Neil Richardson or the Magna editorial committee as soon as possible.