

## **“Do not take the name of the Lord your God in Vain”**

**7:00p.m. Service Sunday July 10th Canon Robert Innes**

I recently went shopping with my son James. He needed new tennis shoes. Inside the sports shop there was a choice of two brands: Adidas or K-Swiss. Adidas are the better known brand, but the styles didn't fit him, so dad was pleased to get the cheaper K-Swiss. He then needed a bag to carry his school books. James took me to the nearby 'superdry' store. Their bags weren't big enough for him, fortunately. So instead we found a luggage shop that sold bags that were bigger, better and cheaper – but without the brand name. Next year the 2012 Olympics take place in London. The brand is so valuable that there have been attempts to sue people who sell products under the label “London 2012” – and some have even wondered whether the number “2012” could become a trademark name. It's all to do with the power of the name. Being associated with the right name makes people feel good about themselves. The right name sells. And names – their creation, use and protection - are more important than ever.

We think today about the third commandment. It is a command that sets limits around the use of the name of God. The people of Israel were defined by their relationship with their God. He was, in modern terms, their trademark. And we Christians, too, define ourselves by our relationship with Israel's God. So the question of how the name of God should be used, and should not be used, affects us, our identity and our lives.

We're going to think first this evening about the meaning of the 3rd commandment. Then we'll look at how this command relates to the other commandments and to the rest of scripture. And thirdly, and most practically, we think together about using and abusing the name of God.

### **1. What does the 3rd Commandment Mean?**

Three different Bible translations give the 3rd commandment like this:

“You shall not make *wrongful use* [saw] of the name of the Lord your God” (NRSV/NIV) cf. Job 31: 5

“You shall not *swear falsely* [saw] by the name of the Lord your God” (Jewish Study Bible) cf Ex 23:1.

“Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God *in vain* [saw” (KJV). cf. Jeremiah 2:30

You can see that each of these translations gives a slightly different perspective. The first concerns wrong use of the name of God – for example wrongly attaching his name to human political projects, the second applies specifically to swearing, such as lying under oath, and the third implies casual or careless use, blaspheming. Which one is right? In fact the scholars tell us that the relevant Hebrew word “saw” has a range of meanings which can span deliberately wrong use and simply careless use. Whichever angle we take we notice that it is a serious command: it’s the only command linked with a specific sanction: the Lord will not hold him guiltless who breaks it. Abusing the name of Nike or Adidas can carry penalties and it is no different with the Lord our God.

## **2. Context**

The ten commandments form a whole and they contain several interesting links. The first three commandments belong together. The first commandment is a command to love the Lord our God exclusively. The second command forbids rival gods. And the third command directs proper use of the name in loving and worshipping God. We see them linked in Deut 6:13: “Fear the Lord your God, serve him only, and take your oaths in his name.” There is a 3 fold loyalty of that is made visible in the way we speak about God.

The 3rd commandment is linked to the fourth. Keep holy the Lord’s name, and keep holy the Lord’s day. Both our speech and how we shape out time testify to our loyalty to God. And the third commandment is linked to the 9th: “Do not bear false witness against your neighbour.” Swearing truthfully before God means living in truth with our fellow human beings. The 10 commandments together provide the context for a life of faithfulness and integrity under God.

## **3. What’s in a Name?**

The general word for a god or gods (el or Elohim) is used often in the Bible, particularly in the first chapters of Genesis. But in Exodus 3, in the dramatic story of the burning bush, God reveals his name to Moses. v13:

‘Moses said to God, Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The god of your fathers has sent me to you and they ask me ‘What is his name’ ‘Then what shall I tell them?’ God said to Moses “I AM who I AM” Tell them “I AM has sent you.” God also said to Moses “Say to the Israelites “Yahweh has sent me to you”.

I AM is a phrase full of mystery, meaning the one who exists, the ground of being, the one beyond comparison. But to this is added a name which sounds similar in Hebrew, the name Yahweh. For Jews this name is too holy to be written down. And so, in our Bibles it is usually written as ‘The LORD’. This is the name of God.

And all of the Old Testament is filling in for us who this God is, what his name represents: his character, his actions. It is by all the deeds and actions associated with this name Yahweh that we know who God is, what he is like and what God does. Through this name, we have access to the knowledge of God. By this name God is present and through this name God is worshipped. So the psalmist can say “we trust in his holy name” just as easily as he can say “we trust in God”.

## **4. Using and Abusing the Name**

#### **4.1 In Worship**

It is above all in worship that the people of Israel – and we Christians too – use, invoke and learn the meaning of God’s name. If we read the book of the law we find that there are many regulations governing the behaviour of the priests, the sacrificial system and the way God is to be approached in worship. These are really intended to ensure that when the people of Israel gather to worship, the God they are worshipping is indeed the true God.

So it is for us. Jesus says we are to worship in Spirit and in truth. Worship is meant to be all about God. It is not entertainment. Neither is it personal or group therapy. It is trying to do something almost impossible – realising the presence of the holy God in our midst. And that’s why all churches have rules governing how worship is to be ordered, what can and can’t be said and by whom, in order that the name of God is honoured and not dishonoured. Notice too, that the Lord’s prayer begins: “hallowed be your name”. In praying, our own personal needs and the needs of the world, find their proper place under the hallowing of God’s name.

#### **4.2 In Blessing**

The association of the name of God with the community results in blessing. So Ex 20:24” In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you.” Actually, one of the main positive uses of the name of God amongst us is in blessing.

Interestingly, Deuteronomy 21:5 says that two specific roles for the priests are “to pronounce blessings in the name of the Lord and to decide all cases of dispute”. Community leadership and blessing are essential to Old Testament priesthood, and I think, to New Testament ministry. Numbers 6 instructs the priests exactly how they are to bless the people with this beautiful three fold blessing involving the three fold invocation of God’s name.

“The LORD bless you and keep you,  
the LORD make his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you,  
the LORD turn his face towards you and give your peace.”

“So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.”

You see it is as the *name* of God is made real amongst us, that we know and experience God’s blessing.

### **4.3 Oaths and Testimony**

In the Old Testament, revering the name of God by swearing truthfully upon it, and not swearing falsely, is one of the most important aspects of using or misusing the name of God. So Jeremiah 4:1-2 summarising the first three commandments says: “Love me, turn away from idols, and swear truthfully by me.” One of the most powerful stories about swearing oaths before God involves Rahab the prostitute. Prostitutes are not known for their trustworthiness (or so people tell me...I don't have any personal experience here.) But in Joshua 2, Rahab declares her faithfulness to God and demands that the Israelite spies swear before God that they will spare her family when they invade the land. There's a solemn pact sworn between Rahab and the spies which leads to the Israelite conquest of Jericho with the sparing of Rahab's family.

In our day, legal officials still see a lot of swearing. Every time I am licenced to a new post I have to swear by Almighty God that I will pay true and canonical obedience to the Bishop. In courts in many countries, people must swear on the Bible or another holy book before giving evidence. And if you get married in church, you will have to declare a solemn vow of fidelity to your partner before God and his people and your family.

The swearing of oaths got seriously out of hand in New Testament times, and so James in our New Testament reading speaks against it, and some groups in the Reformation wanted it abolished. But I think the general sweep of scripture is rather than oaths should be taken seriously, used infrequently and spoken with integrity and commitment.

### **4.4 False Prophecy**

False prophecy occurs when people speak in the name of the Lord wrongly. Ezekiel 13:6: “They say “The Lord declares” when the Lord has not sent them, yet they expect their words to be fulfilled.” False prophecy covers words spoken in the name of the Lord which may be either empty and vain or downright false.

I quite frequently encounter people who say that God has told them this or that, and the responsibility is then to test whether or not the prophetic word is true. I well remember many years ago, a man telling the church I attended that he had been called to be a missionary in China. He was certain because God had told him. No-one else in the church had heard God say this. The man left his wife, went to China, lost a great deal of money and the whole affair ended in tears.

There is a particular responsibility on church leaders who speak out in the name of the church and in the name of God. And we have to exercise great reserve when we hear politicians hitching up their own projects to the name of God. It may be true, but it may not. All prophetic speech that invokes God's name needs to be tested. How you test it is addressed in various parts of the Bible, and this is really a whole different sermon.

### **4.5 Taking the Name Lightly**

There is an instructive passage in Leviticus 24:10 where one of the Israelites misuses God's name in a blasphemous way. Evidently he lost his temper during a fight. If you read the passage you'll see his fate, which is not pleasant.

To take the name of God on one's lips in an unthinking manner, in anger, or casually, or as if the words don't mean anything is a serious matter. The fact that in our day it has become routine doesn't make it any less serious. I'm sure many of us feel pained by the extent to which words that are precious to us are now used casually or as expletives. J. John in his book, *Ten*, gives some practical advice as to how to cope with this if it's a particular concern for you. We can, at least, take care not to do it ourselves.

For her drama degree, my daughter Rebecca had to act a part in which the character uttered a blasphemous expletive in nearly every sentence. Such is modern literature, and a moral dilemma for those who want to live faithfully as Christians but have also to live in the world.

## **5. In Conclusion**

Names are important. The divine name, revealed to Moses at the burning bush is especially important. In the New Testament God is revealed not in the mystery of the blazing fire, but in the flesh and blood of the Lord Jesus. He is given, as St. Paul tells us: "the name which is above every name". So the reverence we ascribe to the name of God is to be given equally to the name of God's Son.

The third commandment is about using and misusing the name of God. We can misuse the name of God, by offering worship that is not centred upon him but upon ourselves, by making promises in his name that we don't keep, by claiming God as told us things that he has not, and by using his name casually, in anger even as a curse.

But we instead invited and encouraged to accentuate the positive. We pray that God's name may be hallowed, in our lives, in the church, in the world. We want his name to be invoked regularly as a source of blessing on our lives, individually and as a community. We want to be faithful to our vows. We strive to speak the truth in God's name. And to resist as far as we are able the trivialising and devaluing of God's name in the society in which we live.

So we close echoing the words of the prophet Isaiah (12:4, 6):

"Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name,  
make known among the nations what he has done,  
and proclaim that his name is exalted.

Sing aloud and shout for joy,  
people of Zion,  
for great is the Holy One of Israel among you."