

**A Sermon preached by the Bishop of Coventry at the Inauguration of the
Coventry Diocesan Synod, 10th November 2012**

**Imagining a 10% Swing to the 10 Commandments
(Readings: Isaiah 30. 18-26; Matthew 22.34-40)**

Introduction: the God of grace

'God will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry: when he hears it he will answer you . . . your eyes shall see your Teacher. And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way: walk in it"'.

The God of the Bible is the God of grace and mercy who is poised to be gracious to us with lashings of help and mercy. God waits only for our cry for help – our turning to him, the 'Teacher' who says to us: "this is the way: walk in it".

When will the tipping point come in our society when we cry out to God for help, for the way that we should walk in? And what will be the answer of the Teacher?

Public and personal flaws

Our public life has taken quite a rocking over recent years, revealing serious flaws in some of our key institutions: multiple crises of our financial systems; extravagant claims for expenses by some of our politicians; phone hacking by journalists, tampering of evidence by the police; blind eyes turned in the BBC; abuse in care homes and even the home that should be the house of care – the Church.

It's not just our institutions that have proved dysfunctional – our families fall apart; mental health deteriorates; wellbeing seems to recede rather than progress.

Behind it all is the spectre of violence and conflict and war from which we seem unable to extricate ourselves.

And yet in the middle of it all there are powerful outbreaks of goodness and hope and of the highest ideals of humanity. The Olympics and, even more, the Paralympics, were the corporate, societal example of the possibility of a different form of human life sweeping the nation and bringing joy.

Indeed, the *sense* that things are not well with the world and that we are not prepared to tolerate less than the best in our institutions, and that we have higher hopes for our families, our communities and our own hearts, is itself a sign of life and hope. It is the stirring of the cry of our hearts for help from the gracious and merciful God, the Teacher.

A cry with a moral core

The most hopeful sign that that stirring of a cry of dis-ease will turn into the sort of cry with which God can work is its moral character. There is a gut sense that at the core of our problems is a breakdown in moral principle and ethical action. During the week I was in a meeting with Frank Field, the long serving MP who

has made no secret of his Christian Faith. He talked about the need for the creation of a 'new social highway code'. I like that expression: a highway code for society to travel safely, an agreed practice of life that allows the diversity of, as it were, cars on our common road with their multiplicity of drivers and variety of driving styles to travel together, and to flourish.

If we were to turn to the Teacher for that 'new social highway code' and say, with all humility, 'which is the way in which we should walk', what would we hear?

I suspect we would hear that the framework of the new social highway code is none other than the ancient code that was given first to the people of Israel and has played a fundamental part in the formation of British life and culture and of the sort of society for which we yearn: the Ten Commandments.

10% closer to the Commandments

Let's think about what that might look like. And let's not set our sights too high. Let's just imagine what might happen to our national and local, family and personal lives if there was a determined attempt to realign our culture by a 10% swing towards the 10 Commandments.

- Just imagine if everyone in our nation became 10% more committed to honouring their father and mother. What would that make our care homes look like, and would we need so many?
- Just imagine if it became 10% less acceptable in the hearts of individuals and institutions to bear false witness against our neighbours. Would the Hillsborough 96 have been vindicated earlier? Would the Leveson Enquiry have been necessary? Would there be fewer employment tribunals?
- What would happen if we were 10% more disciplined about 'remembering the sabbath and keeping it holy'? How would the work-life balance look then? What would happen to levels of mental illness if we were better at resting, really resting. What impact would it have on family life?
- And would the credit crunch and ensuing international economic crisis have happened leaving untold damage in its wake if the financial institutions had been 10% less inclined to covet profit – a covetousness that led them to overextend lending and then repackage debt in parcels which gained in toxicity with each transaction, spreading financial disease across the world. And would this frenzy have been fed in the first place if everyone had been 10% more willing to live within their means?
- What would be the economic and social effect on the black economy, tax avoidance, climate change, child abuse if there were to be a 10% reduction in actions that steal the wealth, the dignity and the life and future of others?

- And what would happen if there were a national, even more, international, covenant to reduce the killing of others by 10%? What would happen to safety on our streets, in a mother's womb, in the places of international tension and threat?
- And what would happen to our families and to the security of our children if there were to be – and let's be even more minimalist here – a 10% reduction in the normalization of adultery in our TV, films and internet?
- What would life look like if there were to be 10% less dishonouring of the name of the LORD your God? We're getting on to the more obviously theological commandments here. But let's not get too complicated. What if we were simply to have 10% less activity that was provocatively disrespectful to those of sincere religious faith – whatever faith?
- What about 10% less idolatry? The trouble with graven images is that they become insatiable objects of our desire and produce craven anxiety to remake ourselves in their image.
- And finally – or should it be first – what if our society was to come 10% closer to acknowledging that there is one God, the God of grace and mercy of whom Isaiah spoke, and that the creator and sustainer of all things has a way for us to walk in? Could not all the believers of all the main faiths unite around a call to the nation to honour the one God on whom life can be built as a rock, rather than the 'no-god' whose foundations are of sand?

Love as the fulfilment of the law

Now, we know that Christian ethics is much more than this: it demands not only practical keeping of the Commandments but requires the sort of heart searching that tests the sentiments and motivations of the heart, testing them by the highest test of love, which as Jesus reminds is the fulfilment of the law. This must be nothing less than the standard to which we as a Synod must call ourselves, the Diocese of Coventry and the whole Church. We are in no position to judge and condemn others, for (as the Bible says) the judgement of God begins with the Household of God. Raising our life to the demanding ethic of Jesus for his people will occupy much of our time as a Synod.

But as a Diocesan Synod we are a public institution of this land and part of a Church by law established for the good of the whole of our society. Therefore, it is our responsibility to be as much concerned for the health of society as for the health of the Church, and it is in that spirit that I suggest we commend to our nation once again the ancient wisdom of the 10 Commandments, the wisdom which is wise enough and road tested enough to be a reliable social highway code for our national life.

For the Teacher says, 'This is the way, walk in it' – the Teacher who is waiting to be gracious to us and ready to rise up and run towards us to show us mercy.