

The giving of the Law

What is the Law? According to the Cambridge Dictionary one of the meanings of the word “Law” is “a rule, usually made by a government, that is used to order the way in which a society behaves” or for a complete set of Laws: “the system of rules of a particular country, group, or area of activity”. It is clear that laws exist so that we have an ordered society or country. These rules are often enforced by institutions, in England by the Police, and if the Police charge you with breaking one of these rules, the Law Courts will determine whether this is the case and what punishment you deserve.

But who determines these rules? Well, in the UK, it is the government. It could be UK wide, national or local government, and each has the power to set rules via a democratic process, i.e. via a representation of the majority of representatives of that area: for instance Parliament. It therefore also is clear that laws change. What would have been legal a number of years ago, may now be prohibited. For instance, wearing seatbelts was only made mandatory in 1991. On the other hand homosexuality was made legal over a period of time in the 20th Century, followed by the right for same-sex couples to marry. So in effect the authority that sets the law is based on what the opinion is of the people of a nation. Those people give the authority to Government and Parliament through its elected representatives.

The Law in the Bible

That is different in the Bible. The definition of the law is the same as our nation's: “rules, usually made by a government, that is used to order the way in which a society behaves”. But in this case the government is God himself. Moses was not elected by the people of Israel. Moses in effect became the leader of Israel as God appointed him to that role, even before Israel as a nation came into being. We see in Exodus 18, that as God's representative Moses had to resolve disputes of all the people. Based on the advice of his father in law, he delegated this role to leaders in the community. But at that time they seemed to decide right from wrong based on their own ideas of justice.

And in Chapter 20 God sets out the rules the people of Israel should follow, as he governs them. The people of God are gathered at Mount Sinai, the same mountain where Moses met God in the burning bush, the mountain that God claims as his own. And here God reminds Moses of who he is. The God who rescued them from Egypt, and the one who provided for them in the desert.

And here God calls his people to himself and gives them a vocation: “If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession [...] you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

In the rest of the Chapter 19, God shows himself to Israelites: They have to consecrate themselves, gather in front of the mountain, he prohibits them to touch the mountain as it is holy. And then on the third day God appears as thunder, lightning, a thick cloud, fire, trembling of the mountain and the sound of a loud trumpet. It is then that he calls

Moses and Aaron to him on the mountain. And it is in this scene that God issues his commands.

After God has spoken his commands “[...] the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance ¹⁹ and said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die” (Exod 20:18-19). Moses said: “Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning” (Exod 20:20).

It is out of fear and awe that the people of God hear and receive the Law from God.

Ten Commandments

I presume that you are quite familiar with the Ten Commandments, but it is always good to re-read and re-acquaint ourselves with it. There is actually unclarity about what the Ten Commandments are: Different traditions (Jewish, Catholic, Protestant and Lutheran) divide them up differently. It is interesting that the text itself does not refer to them as Ten Commandments – this is the title of this section, which is provided to us by the translators... but it is not in the original text.

God writes the commands on two stone tablets: that is mentioned in Exodus 31, and tradition holds that 1-4 are on the first tablet and 5-10 are on the second, as the first 4 refer to our relationship with God, and 5-10 of our relationship with other people.

But before God issues his commands he again starts with himself as the authority “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Ex 20:2). Some traditions hold that this is actually part of the first command, with then reads: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex 20:3). God is the God of Israel and he demands all of Israel’s worship, not of other so-called gods, neither of any image of him (Ex 20:4). And this could be a physical image (idol) or a mental image, in which we restrict God to the one we like him to be, instead of who he really is. And God makes clear that he is a jealous God – punishing those who do not worship him, but loving those who worship him. He then urges the Israelites not to misuse his name, i.e. to invoke his name needlessly, irreverently or against God’s own will. The obvious case is swearing using God’s name, but it also prohibits that we invoke God’s name to achieve our own agendas...

The fourth regulates the day when God and his people spend time together: the Sabbath. As God rested from creation, God wants us to rest as well. In our current society we cannot always avoid to work on a Sunday, as our society is not governed by God’s laws, but it is good to have at least one day of rest in the week, and to dedicate to us and him together.

5-10 are a lot shorter and in a way easier: Murder, adultery, stealing and giving false testimony (in the law courts) are prohibited. And these laws are still basis of the UK law, although the one about adultery is rapidly being eroded... But what is not in UK law are the first and the last of this section: Honour your father and your mother and do not covet someone else’s possessions. This is not regulated in UK law.

Honouring father and mother does not necessarily mean obey them, especially as adults, and in old age father and mother may not be able to make decisions. It is to do with the transmission of faith across generation, demanding that the younger generation have to take the older generations seriously, so that they when they become the older generation they can pass the faith on to their younger generation. But practically it also ensures that those who are older and weaker are honoured, even though they do not have the physical power to demand the honour any more.

And finally, God speaks to our desires for things – especially for those things that belong to others, as that desire may result in actions that harm the others around us. God does not want to focus our desire on other people's possession, he wants our desire for himself.

I really cannot do full justice to the richness of the Ten Commandments and the way that they should shape our lives. If you are interested in a deeper but also lighthearted exposition of the Ten Commands, I can recommend "[Just 10](#)", a series of talks by J. John, which you can still find on YouTube, although it is a bit older now.

The interesting thing is that J. John's latest talk series is called Just One, which is focused on Church Unity, but it also echoes that God is Just One, and there is no other – the basis of the Ten Commandments.

Conclusion

So whatever you take from this is, what I would like you to remember is that the authority of the Ten Commandments are in God and through God. They do not have any meaning if you do not believe in God or accept God. Just as the UK law would not have any meaning if there was no government or agencies that would enforce or educate us about it.

As Christians we remember that the Western Law was more based on the morality of the Bible. But as the people reject God they also reject his morality. The only way that we can re-establish God's law in our communities is through more and more people accepting God for who he is.

Jesus comes to us with forgiveness of sins, but later in the year we we also study how Jesus takes these laws and makes them even more radical. Jesus is God, and is also jealous for us and for our worship of him. And we do not worship him if we do not follow his commands. And we do him injustice if we portray Jesus and God as the meek and mild baby in the stable. Yes, that is Jesus, but Jesus is also the one who sits on the right hand of the throne of God.

And we are able to approach this throne through Jesus' love, forgiveness and the price that he paid for us. But maybe we can also learn from the Israelites about the nature and identity of God, when they saw "the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, and trembled with fear: "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die". But Jesus with Moses also says to us: "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning". I sometimes think that in Church we have lost that fear of God. Because if we did, we would take the Ten Commandments much more seriously. Amen.