

The Sixth Commandment November 2, 2014

The Rich Man and Lazarus

Before I begin my remarks upon the Sixth Commandment, “Thou shall not kill,” I would like to take just a moment, in the spirit of today’s Gospel reading to remind everyone and I do mean everyone of the absolute necessity of regular, planned, charitable giving. By planned I do not mean that the object of our giving is always premeditated but, rather that the dedication of a certain base commitment of our time and treasure to the assistance of others be established as part of our routine of life and financial planning. This kind of deliberate effort to aid our fellow human beings is of invaluable assistance for the cultivation of a charitable disposition that will help us to recognize and have compassion upon the Lazarus’s that God sets at the doorways of our lives. As we can see from today’s parable, neglect of effort in this part of our spiritual struggle can have serious and unpleasant consequences.

Also, it should not escape our attention that the principal focus of our charitable works is to be local. One of the great “unintended consequences’ of the 24/7 news cycle is that it tends to focus our attention on all kinds of big troubles that we are unable to do much about. In addition to the tendency of all this to subtly depress us, it also tends to make us ‘overlook’ the daily family and neighborly kindnesses and helpfulness that we can do.

All right then, let’s get to our main subject this morning, the Sixth Commandment, “Thou shalt not kill”.

God has long labored to call mankind out of the savagery, whether primitive or civilized, into which he inevitably falls when he detaches himself from communion with God. “Thou shalt not kill,” was voiced into a world where human life was cheap at best, a world where the ideas of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as basic human rights were non-existent. In separating out from the barbarity of the ancient world a “peculiar people”, Israel, God sought to set an example for all of humanity. Israel was to be a “light unto the Gentiles”. The whole goal, was, and is to lead humanity out of the Egypt of slavery to their own

corruption and into the promised land of a restored humanity based on a restored communion with God himself. This is the epic theme of the whole Bible.

Christians in America have long enjoyed the blessing of civil laws that were based on these Judeo-Christian commandments and their derivative moral/ethical system. However, the time for that seems to be ending. Perhaps nothing is more illustrative of this change than what we can see now happening relative to this Sixth Commandment, "Thou shalt not kill". Let's take a look at this commandment then.

First we must recognize that the term "kill" used here means what we would call "murder". Murder, according to Webster's Dictionary means, "to kill a human being unlawfully, especially with premeditated malice". The question then becomes what constitutes 'lawful'? Everybody and every society of people has some way of determining this, some form of law. For the Hindu's it was lawful to burn a man's wife alive on his funeral pyre. For the old Greeks, it was lawful for a man to sacrifice his own children to the Gods. Today it is lawful in some countries for Moslems to kill their own wives and children in 'honor' killing and to behead non-Moslems for no other reason at all. Closer to home in America it is now lawful to kill unborn children and in some states it is now lawful to assist someone in killing themselves.

None of this, however, qualifies as lawful under the meaning of the Sixth Commandment. Lawful, for the people of Israel, old or new, means lawful by God's standards, not by mans. Here is where the modern Christian must make a clear and definitive break with popular opinion, based as it is on the principles, (whether it knows it or not), of relativism and materialism. The modernist idea of law, what is called 'progressive' law is that of man's making. According to this view each grouping of people as a society forms rules that seem best to them in their circumstances and that all of these rules or laws are subject to change as man evolves socially. There are thus no absolute moral standards.

Neither, of course, is there any need to re-establish a living communion with a deity that, in their view, does not really exist. Thus we have the popular mood today of so-called tolerance, where it is boldly asserted, "I can be good

without God and with or without any particular religion – and if you disagree with me about this, it proves that you are a bad person.” The shocking thing about this is that there are so many supposedly intelligent people who think this way. However the claim, “I can be good”, is effectively meaningless if at the same time one has reduced the term “good” itself to meaninglessness. More evidence that the world must be ending soon.

But that is not our concern, anymore than all of the “big” problems of the world are our concern. Happily, God has His own agenda and history is full of His little surprises. The Scriptural phrase that best sums up our attitude towards all of this is, “as for me and my household, we will follow the Lord”. It has always been so.

Still, we do not live in a vacuum, or in an Orthodox ghetto. To the degree that we are able to, we are expected to participate in the social, cultural and political society in which we live. We are still to be a light to the Gentiles, a leaven in the world.

Please do not misunderstand my previous comments. I am not recommending a sort of pious apathy towards the world’s problems, far from it. Some Christians do seem to think that political activity is somehow worldly and thus unclean. Pharisees! Jesus was not polluted by his eating with sinners, touching sick people or consorting with unbelievers, Samaritans and Canaanites. Read in “Every Day Saints” how the monks went in procession to the town hall to vote. They drove the Communist officials’ nuts! The light of our faith must not be hidden under the bushel basket of false piety. Along that line, how many of us are planning to vote this coming Tuesday?

Still, all of this is of little consequence if we fail to follow the Lord ourselves- if our religious life is simply a matter of a certain “traditional” philosophy of conservative ideas and legalistic moral opinions. As I said before, God’s Commandments are intended to do much more, (but not less), than simply establishing a stable and polite society. Their primary purpose is not the establishment of a Christian civilization in this world but of making possible the

reunion of God and man. This is what is meant when we say that Christian morals are not just ethical, but mystical.

Jesus himself touches upon this Sixth Commandment in St. Matthew's Gospel where he teaches that beyond murder itself, even maintaining anger against others creates a barrier to communion with God. This, by the way, indicates one of the most important things for us to be aware of when we are coming to receive Holy Communion. "Create in me a clean heart and renew in me a right spirit", must always be our prayer at these moments. Hostility towards others, unwillingness to forgive, rancor, bitterness, despising people, all comes under this Commandment because those things are in fact, the ultimate murder, self murder. Blessed Augustine in his commentary on this commandment emphasized this very point. Christ in the Gospels makes it clear that He is opening the deeper meaning of the commandment to His Disciples when He says, "But I say to you", for it was He, Christ, who gave Moses the Commandments in the first place.

I could go on for quite awhile longer about all of this but – enough for now. But let us try, with all our hearts, all of our minds and all of our strength to free ourselves of all anger, resentment or ill will towards our fellow human beings. Listen to the prayers and hymns of the Holy Liturgy this morning and join your will to their intentions. For all of this is to lead us to a true communion with Jesus, who is the great lover of mankind. Pray that we may, with God's help, be enabled to forgive, even as we hope to be forgiven. Amen