

The Third Commandment

(Billy Graham had just died)

I was ordained just as Billy Graham's mission to London began in 1966. So it was that I often accompanied coach parties to hear him at Earl's Court. On one evening a young pop star, who had just become a Christian, sang to us – Cliff Richard. I will tell you what he sang at the end of my sermon.

If you hear someone say the name of a person you know, you think of that person. Their name calls them to mind, their appearance, their character, and their relationship to you – relation, friend, colleague, boss, employee, fellow church member, and so on. Their name stands for them.

In Old Testament times names had meanings. Footnotes often tell us this. For example a footnote to Genesis, the first book of the Bible, chapter 17 tells us that the name Abram means *Exalted father*. God changed Abram's name to Abraham, which another footnote tells us means *Father of many*, which indeed Abraham became.

As we heard in our reading, when God called Moses to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt, 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. That is what you are to say to the Israelites 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (Ex. 3.13-14). Shorter forms of this are YHWH, pronounced Yahweh, or Jehovah. Jewish people later used the expression "The LORD", with LORD in capitals, so as to avoid saying Yahweh and possibly misusing God's name. His name was used just once a year, by the high priest when giving the blessing on the Jewish Day of Atonement. This practice of putting The LORD instead of Yahweh has been followed in most English Bibles, including the New International Version, which we use in All Saints.

Mention of God's name brings to mind who he is and what he has done. In particular what he has done for you personally. Just so with God the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus means God our Saviour, hence the angel's words to Joseph when Mary was expecting her baby (in our gospel reading) "He will save his people from their sins" (Mt. 1.21). When we hear the name of Jesus we think of who he is, and what he did during his short time on earth, and of his crucifixion and resurrection. Maybe we also think of how he is now, in his glory in heaven, as described in the Book of Revelation.

Today we are thinking about the third commandment, which God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai, and which is about his name. "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name." (Ex. 20.7). And when Moses reminded the next generation of Israelites of the ten Commandments forty years later, before they crossed into the promised land, as recorded in the book of Deuteronomy chapter 5, the wording of the third commandment was exactly the same – "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name."

Suppose when someone was annoyed, they used your name, in your hearing, as an expletive. "Smith", "Jones" or whatever your name is. What would you think? You would not be best pleased.

I have had something similar happen to me. One day in the early 1970s my children came home from school saying "What's wrong with our surname?" I had no idea what they were talking about. The name Pratt probably originally meant someone who lived by meadow, a pratum in Latin. But in due course I heard there had been at that time a television series which featured a person named Prat, spelt with one t, who used to do stupid things. Prat had become to mean a stupid fool.

As a result some people named Pratt, including my two sons, changed their name. Comparison of telephone directories some years later seemed to show that about 20% of Pratts did so. But some of the rest of us took the view that in time the abusive word would drop out of our language; I think it is beginning to do so. I hope so.

I still wince when I hear it used as an insult, and even more when it is used personally against me, as it has been a couple of times.

How much more is God offended when people thoughtlessly say “O my God”, “Jesus”, “Christ”, “Good Lord”. A number of other words and expressions are derived from those – for example Gosh (God), by golly (by God), by jove (Jehovah), bloody (By Our Lady), crikey (Christ).

It might have seemed to some people that misusing God’s name was much less important than having other gods, which was forbidden by the first commandment, or than by making images of God, which was forbidden by the second commandment. So therefore, to emphasise the seriousness of the misuse of his name, God added a warning “For the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.” Misuse of God’s name will lead to punishment.

As a young man first in the Merchant Navy and then in the Royal Navy, I allowed my language to include words that did not enhance it. Deliberate choice at first led to automatic use, which I found myself unable to control. As the Apostle James wrote, in his letter in the New Testament, the tongue “corrupts the whole person ...No man can tame the tongue.” (Jas.3.6, 8).

But what I could not do, God did, when I turned to Christ and was born again - those words just dropped from my speech immediately and forever. It was one of the clear signs of the difference that the Holy Spirit made in my life. Praise God. I had been restored. I was forgiven.

I realise that it is not that simple for some people when they turn to Christ. For one person I knew well it was only when they had been delivered from an evil spirit in the name of Jesus that similar words dropped from their vocabulary. So if you are a Christian troubled by swearing, it could be that you too need the ministry of deliverance in the authority of the name of Jesus. If you think that might be so, please talk to Andrew or me about it, though probably not after this service, so as to maintain strict confidentiality.

If we really know God, and appreciate what he has done for us, we will not wish to use his name thoughtlessly. He created us, he supplies our needs day by day, he gave his Son to die for us on the cross bearing our sins, so that we might be forgiven, and be born again to eternal life. How can we, if we are disciples of Jesus, use any expression which dishonours him? Which dishonours his name?

He has the name above all names. King David wrote in both the beginning and end of Psalm 8 “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Ps.8.1, 9). The Apostle Peter said to the Jewish leaders about the name of Jesus “There is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4.12b). And the Apostle Paul wrote, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”(Romans 10.13).

It is indeed “The Name high over all” as one hymn writer put it. “How sweet the name of Jesus sounds” as another hymn writer wrote. And a third wrote “At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow”. There is no name which should be used more respectfully than God’s name.

Billy Graham, who passed on to heaven a few days ago, was given to humour on occasions. He once said “A Christian should so live that he would not be afraid to sell the family parrot to the local gossip.”

In passing I will mention that this week I was with someone who was once asked to be in the group that sat on the platform for one of Billy Graham's meetings at Haringey in 1954. She told me how, sitting just two seats away from him, she was so impressed with Billy Graham's humility.

To return to my theme - some of us have to live or work with unbelievers who not infrequently misuse God's name. That is a trial. It might be right to pick your moment to say something like "I will be most grateful if you did not use the name of Jesus like that please. His name means a great deal to me."

But expletives are not the only way of misusing God's name. Speaking about the Pharisees, The Lord Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah "These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. (Matt. 15. 8.) Likewise the prophet Jeremiah said to God about his contemporaries "You are always on their lips but far from their hearts". (Jer. 12. 2b). As the Lord Jesus once said "God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth". (John 4. 24)

As disciples of Jesus we need to focus on the Lord when we come to worship him together, as we have come here to do today, so that we do not use his name thoughtlessly. I find it helpful before I leave home to come to church to spend a moment drawing near to him. And it is good to ask Jesus to help me come rightly to a church service, not focused on what I might get out of the service, but on what I can put in to it.

Our thoughts may wander at times in services, but, as the apostle Paul wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians, we need to "Take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor.10. 5). We need to return to focusing on the Lord.

In our worship we need to be singing to him. In our praying we need to be praying to him.

Indeed the Lord Jesus told his disciples to pray in his name. He did this three times on the evening before his crucifixion. He said "I will do whatever you ask in my name. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it." (John 14. 13-14). "The Father will give you whatever you ask in my name." (John 15.16). "I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete." (John 16. 23-24).

To ask in Jesus' name means that we can ask the Father because, through his death upon the cross, Jesus has opened the way for us disciples to approach the Father, and it also means to ask for something that is in harmony with what Jesus wishes.

We ought also to try to honour the Lord's name in our conversation, and in our actions day by day. If we are known as Christians, people will be watching our words and our conduct. What we say and what we do will either honour the Lord or will dishonor his name, especially when we are under pressure, or things are not going right for us.

There may be occasions when we need to call on the Lord by name. You will may remember the blind beggar who was sitting by the roadside, who was told that "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by". He called out 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' Those who led the way rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' Jesus stopped and ordered the man to be brought to him. When he came near, Jesus asked him 'What you want me to do for you?' 'Lord, I want to see' he replied. Jesus said to him 'Receive your sight; your faith has healed you.' Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus, praising God. When all the people saw it, they also praised God." (Luke 18. 35-43).

Nearly twenty years ago, when I had a much better sense of balance, I explored various sloping clifftops along the coast looking for wild flowers, from Durlston westwards. I just started to use four-point crampons to help me not to slip. But they came without any directions, and I had put them on the wrong way, with the loose ends of the straps inwards.

On one occasion I trod on a loose end and tripped up and went rolling uncontrollably down the slope. I could see I was going to hit my head on a rock. "Lord" I called out. I came to a sudden stop. I could not see why. My body had not come up against anything. I had just stopped. If I had gone further I would have rolled into a bramble thicket rather than over the top of the cliff. But I knew that God had answered my prayer for help.

Last April after my back operation I was in considerable pain at times. The hospital staff used to ask me, on their rounds, what level of pain on a scale of 1 to 10 I was experiencing. On three occasions, when I was on my own, it got to 9. On each occasion I cried out to the Lord like the blind beggar, as well as ringing the bell to ask for morphine. The Lord answered directly, as well as through the hospital staff.

So I encourage you to call on the name of the Lord when you are in danger, pain or other similar needs.

The song which Cliff Richard sang was "It is no secret what God can do. What he's done for others, we can do for you." Yes he can.

Let us have a few moments for silent reflection.

Lord, help us we pray, always to use your name aright. Help us, as disciples of Jesus, to honour you with our lips, in church and in the world, but "not only with our lips but in our lives ... by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days" (*Prayer Book, General Thanksgiving*) and to worship you in spirit and in truth, and to call upon your name when we are in trouble. In Jesus' name. Amen